



Graduation 2003: Lely's Cayman Hawke's path to graduation was a challenge

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Editor's note: *This is the fifth of a series of profiles about Graduates of Distinction in the Class of 2003 at the various high schools in the geographic area served by the Daily News. The series continues through May 23. Lely High's list of scholarship and award winners will be published in an upcoming edition of the Daily News.*



When Cayman Hawke receives his Lely High School diploma Friday, his travails into accessible education will have been worthwhile.

Cayman was diagnosed with spinal meningitis when he was 6 months old, causing him to lose more than 90 percent of his hearing ability. Meningitis is an infection of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord.



Cayman Hawke, 18, tries to answer a question recently during his advanced placement American history class at Lely High School. [Erik Kellar/Staff](#)

In 1992, when Cayman was in the third grade, he was forced to spend four hours a day traveling on a bus to school. Wilbur Hawke thought that was too much time for his son to spend away from class, so he did something about it — something that would change their lives.

Wilbur Hawke, then a construction worker, filed a federal civil rights suit against the Collier County School District — and won, forcing the

district to set up full-time educational programs for hearing-impaired students like his son.

"I didn't understand what was going on then, but I realize today that what my dad did helped all kids in Florida that were like me," Cayman said.

The suit centered around Cayman not being able to stay in his third-grade class at Tommie Barfield Elementary School on Marco Island. At the time, county schools had a part-time program for hearing-impaired students, but had to set up full-time sessions because of a ruling that students could be bused no more than 98 minutes.

Because there was no full-time program, Cayman had to travel each day from Marco Island to Fort Myers. His father felt the long round-trip bus rides were discriminatory, taking Cayman from fellow students and depriving him the opportunity to grow educationally and socially in his hometown setting.

The suit claimed the School District was violating federal law that calls for special education to be as accessible as possible. Wilbur Hawke pleaded his son's case to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. It took about 18 months, but the federal department sided with Hawke.

School District spokesman Joe Landon said the district spent \$58,937,00 on exceptional student education in fiscal 2001-02. Figures for this school year were not available.

As a result of the controversy, Cayman was held back to repeat third grade at Tommie Barfield, where he began receiving special assistance, his father said. Cayman then moved on to Manatee Middle School, then Lely High.

Today, Cayman, 18, is an A-B student who has taken advance placement courses in psychology and American history classes, and honors courses in the rest, his father said.

"He is an extraordinary young man," said Wilbur Hawke, now an advocate for special education students. He is regional coordinator for the nonprofit Family Network on Disabilities of Florida. He also serves as parent liaison for Collier County Exceptional Student Education through a project called Sharing the Commitment.

DETAILS

Class of 2003, Lely High School

Class size: 360

Commencement: 7 p.m., Friday, May 23, at Lely High

Senior Class Officers: Megan Atkinson, president; Chris Young, vice president; Amanda Wilkie, secretary; John LaCava, treasurer; Todd Cofer, James St. Louis, Jessica Martin and Danielle Poling, student representatives.

Five days a week, three hours a day, Cayman works with an elementary

school student with similar challenges. He also volunteers at Laurel Oak Elementary.

"I am a caregiver," he said.

He wants his classmates to understand him and his disability. He took it upon himself to teach them, speaking before his psychology class in December 2002.

"That's when I really did a lot of research about my disability," he said.

He credited his teacher, Theresa Demery, for "taking the time to understand me and teach others in the class to understand." It was in her class that a special clip-on microphone, attached to Demery, was utilized to increase Cayman's ability to hear.

"Our class has many spontaneous discussions and I felt Cayman wasn't getting the full benefit," she said. "I asked for a second microphone to allow the students to pass the second microphone around the group. It allowed Cayman to feel more part of the conversation. Of course, there were the times that he shut my microphone off without my knowledge."

Demery said Cayman is "a gift." "He is so personal, and armed with a smile that warms the room," she said.

Cayman has been accepted to Florida Gulf Coast University, but isn't sure what he wants to study.

"I've learned about being an auto mechanic after dad bought me a truck that I have to repair," he said. "I like to do things with my hands and solving the problems. I'll probably take mostly required courses in the first two years of college to give me time to think about a profession."

During the tough times his family has carried him through.

"Dad, my mom, Rhonda Hamilton, and brother, Conan, have been there for me," he said. "Conan's 24 and I have relied on him more as I get older."

Cayman has a number of friends, whom, he said, took the time to get to know him. He advised others who may know a person with a disability to take the time to get to know him or her.

"Always give time for the person, to see who they really are," he said. "Not just on the outside. By taking time you will realize what you might have missed on the inside."