Hinsdale South grad perseveres 12 years for degree

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By JANE MICHAELS

Twelve years in the making, his diploma from New York City's Columbia University represents a special triumph for Donald Taylor.

Just before his last graduation -- from Hinsdale South High School in 1996 -- Taylor's life had turned upside down.

A stormy relationship boiled over one spring night, resulting in a severe beating from his father, and Taylor ran away from their Hinsdale apartment.

"I spent close to the last month of school just roaming around sleeping wherever I could -- friends' laundry rooms, cars and parks," he recalled. "I traded fried chicken from where I worked to sleep in a friend's closet."

Despite the turmoil in his life, Taylor was determined to graduate.

"I have this weird knack for focusing. Even though I left my father's house under storm, there was only one thing on my mind," he said. "It was never an option to leave Hinsdale South without a diploma. I did whatever I had to do to (graduate) May 31."

Following the ceremony, Taylor moved in with his grandmother in Chicago's Austin neighborhood. He
progressed through a series of jobs at Burger King, Northern Trust Bank, and the West Side.

At Malcolm X College, where Taylor took classes, he was encouraged to develop his writing ability and apply to Columbia University in New York. Initially, he turned down the rejection letter as motivation. He took more courses at Harold Washington Community College and was finally accepted into Columbia in 2005, at the age of 25.

Admission, however, was just the first obstacle; life in Manhattan was expensive. At one point, Taylor held five jobs to afford tuition and rent.

Scott Halvorson, Taylor's advisor and associate dean of students in Columbia's general studies program, said he was pleased to recommend the hard-working student for a scholarship in 2007.

"I think the world of him and all the success he's gained," Halvorson said. "He's offered a great lesson about perseverance and not giving up, about taking a hit and rethinking it, making another approach. Obviously, it worked, and that's especially satisfying to see."

Majoring in African-American studies, Taylor specialized in researching Malcolm X and assisted a professor writing a biography. That expertise and an interest in historical memory -- the study of facts, compared to how a culture remembers an historical figure -- has led to a number of speaking engagements in various cities.

Taylor gave a speech commemorating the 400th anniversary of America's first settlement in Jamestown, Va., which is being published in a collection by a Cambridge University scholar.

"The way I'm interested in history is more along themes than people," Taylor said. "I've always been interested in the way people announced their independence."

Now that he's graduated from Columbia, Taylor plans to begin a master's degree program in medieval history at Eastern Illinois University in the fall. He said he's always been interested in church history.

Taylor attributes his academic and personal success to having a vision and a willingness to take risks.

"I never stopped dreaming. You can get down on yourself, especially when things go wrong," he said. "I understand how valuable stability is, but you can't be scared to take a chance."

Hinsdale South math teacher Julie Sweet said she appreciated hearing the success story of her former student.

"What impressed me about Donald is that even when things weren't going so well for him, he always came in with a big smile on his face," Sweet said. "His eyes twirled."

"Even back then, he developed the skills that led him to be successful. Good for him. That's just fantastic."