

Graduates end a chapter, begin another at ceremony

By SABIAN WARREN
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For 160 Western Piedmont Community College students, Wednesday evening marked the end of one chapter of their lives and the beginning of another.

The students donned caps and gowns for a bitter-sweet ceremony as the college held its annual spring graduation at the City of Morganton Municipal Auditorium.

When it was all over, students, some smiling, others teary-eyed, filed into the lobby clutching their coveted diplomas as family members and friends offered handshakes and hugs.

"I'm glad it's finally over," said Victoria Johnson, a 38-year-old Morganton resident who earned a degree in industrial engineering technology. "I'm happy, but the circumstance kind of brings tears, too."

Her boyfriend, Jackie Stevens, said, "She's really been dedicated to school. She's really worked hard. I'm very proud of her."

Victoria's mother, Annie Mae Johnson, was beam-

ing over her daughter's achievement, as well.

"We're just so proud of her. I always knew she had so much potential. You can see the self-confidence she has," Johnson said.

Keynote speaker for the evening was Alex Huppe, a former English instructor at Western Piedmont who is today the director of Public Affairs at Harvard University.

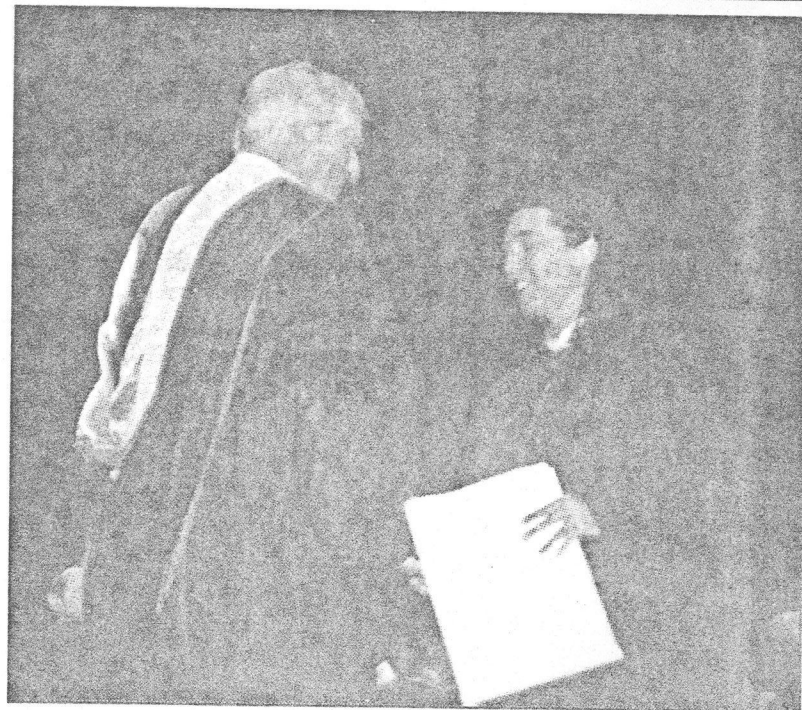
Huppe talked about the importance of making investments, particularly in education.

"Education is a good investment and it continues to pay off," he told more than 1,000 people on hand in the packed auditorium. "Education holds the promise of change, renewal and hope for reinventing ourselves in a changing world."

Huppe lauded the founders of Western Piedmont for investing in Morganton's future.

"They certainly knew that higher education can transform a community. There is something about higher education that makes a good community bet-

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Western Piedmont graduate Shelley Williams gets her diploma and a handshake from college President Dr. Jim Richardson during graduation ceremonies Wednesday at CoMMA. (Photo by Sabian Warren)

WPCC graduation

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ter," he said.

Winning the Alumnus of the Year Award was Maggie Simmons Hughes, who graduated in 1988 with a degree in business administration. Hughes attended college while raising five children and working at Burke Mills. The long-time employee of Burke Mills started out making \$3.35 an hour and today holds a management position with the company.

Winning the Excellence in Teaching Award was Cindy Konarski, a therapeutic recreation instructor who has been with the college since 1989.

Presenting both awards was Gerald Stephens, president of Western Piedmont Foundation Inc.

Presenting diplomas were college President Dr. Jim Richardson and Executive Vice President Richard Greene.

Charles Taylor, president of the

college's board of trustees, and Student Government Association President Michelle Sullivan offered opening remarks.

But the new graduates were the real stars of the evening. Patricia Dean, a 31-year-old Valdese resident who studied office systems technology, said she was looking forward to the future.

"It's about time," she said. "I started here five years ago. It's been a long time coming."

Annie Mae Johnson added a plug for the 2,500-student school.

"I think it's great we have Western Piedmont Community College in the community. It's been great for her (Victoria). I've just seen it change so many peoples' lives down through the years. It's right here, people need to take advantage of it."