

Distinguished alums return to Chenango Valley High

BY JENNIFER MICALE • JMICAL@GANNETT.COM • OCTOBER 23, 2009, 9:50 PM

FENTON -- Heather Higginbottom wanted to help the poor.

That's what the 1990 Chenango Valley High School graduate told her guidance counselor 19 years ago. Her career ultimately took her to the White House, where she's currently Deputy Director of Domestic Affairs for President Barack Obama. She's the author of Obama's recent "Back to School" speech as well.

"It's strange that I remember the conversation after 19 years," said Charles Purce, now the high school's director of guidance.

Higginbottom paid a visit to her alma mater Friday, along with 1984 graduate Thomas J. Madison, the former state Commissioner of Transportation and currently vice president for STV Inc. of New York City; and 1975 graduate and editorial cartoonist Doug MacGregor of the Fort Myers, Fla., News-Press.

The district will welcome the three into the CV Hall of Fame on Saturday night during a dinner at The McKinley. Claudette Simonis and former CV athletic director Carl Newton will receive the Distinguished Community Service Award during the event.

The three graduates spent Friday talking to students about their experiences. Speaking in the auditorium, Higginbottom fielded questions about Obama, such as what he's like ("very even-tempered and tells you what he expects"), what he drives (the Secret Service usually does the driving these days, but he did have a Ford Escape) and whether she could put him on speaker phone at the school.

"It might work, but then I wouldn't have a job to go back to!" she joked.

MacGregor, who has authored more than a dozen children's books and has his work on exhibit in several national galleries, spoke to art students about the importance of their portfolios. "I didn't have very good SAT scores, so thank God I could draw," MacGregor said.

The three also took time to reminisce about teachers and their memories of the school. "This used to be the main entrance, so standing here is strange!" said Madison, standing outside the auditorium.

The grads were a hit with students.

"It was really neat to hear her talk about the President," said junior Brook Personius about Higginbottom. "She's a great role model."

"I just think it's amazing that she could come from such a small town and get the job that she has," added junior Amber Kotasek.