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Darien High School's Class of 2017 Graduates, Spirits Undampened

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The phrase "the sky's the limit" took on a whole new meaning for Darien High School's Class of 2017 as the graduation ceremony got a little wet under a gray sky that threatened rain on Friday.

But for the most part, the precipitation was so light that it evaporated about as soon as you could feel it. Umbrellas came out, briefly, a couple times when rain fell in drops.

Superintendent Dan Brenner [had sent out an email](#) to students and parents shortly after noon to explain that officials had decided not to move graduation indoors because they didn't think rain would ruin the event, based on a meteorologist's forecast for Darien, and the forecast proved true. Brenner did suggest that people dress appropriately for the weather and mentioned that some might be bringing umbrellas.

Officers of the Class of 2017 announced that the class will be donating a trophy case for the display of

academic competition awards.

Another Tradition: A Little Rowdiness

Amid the pomp of the circumstance of graduation, and the graduation speeches with their traditional advice and observations, some traditional rowdiness squirmed out from under the caps and gowns.

When the line about the "land of the free and the home of the brave" was sung during the national anthem, students suddenly shouted "wave" in unison (not nearly the first time that's ever happened in the home of the Blue Wave).

First one, then eventually three beach balls started bouncing about among the students. At some points it bounced over to some of the teachers at the left end of the front row of academics. A teacher gave it a good kick back toward the students, and there it was — in play again.

At another point, it nearly knocked into the photographer taking pictures of students after they left the stage with their diplomas. A groan went through the student ranks — as if nobody really wanted anyone's picture memento of the day to be ruined by their fun. For a while, the balls couldn't be seen.

After a decent interval, they again returned to flight. The next time one landed near the photographer, he kicked it back into the crowd.

Serious Notes and Musical Notes

Several students took a part of the ceremony to speak of two deceased classmates who didn't make it to this year's graduation.

One spoke of JR Schoen: "He had the ability to turn frowns into grins. He possessed a contagious sense of happiness and a strong compassion for others.

"[His] heartwarming and cheerful spirit is captured perfectly in this simple quote by the Dalai Llama: 'If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.' Although JR is not here to accept his diploma, his spirit is here in all of us."

Others spoke about Jacob Velasco-Navarro, who had cancer and graduated early, before passing away. One said:

"Jacob was a friend of incredible character. Even the terrifying prospect of cancer didn't stop him from being himself, and throughout his battleshe remained positive and in good spirits, and even in his last days, he'd crack jokes and poke fun at his friends and family. [...] As we go up to the stage and receive our diplomas, he stands with us in spirit."

Another said that despite his diagnosis of cancer several years ago, "He was still always a positive kid who could make me laugh. [...] He made many close friends."

Later, as Tianjia Du played on a flute, butterflies were released in memory of the two students. They flew around the ceremony for more than an hour afterward.

Musical selections for the event included "The Show," performed by Jason Reeves, Juliana Mazzotta and Margarat Skeats, and "I Hope You Dance," performed by Lee Ann Womack, Avery Brook and Jordan Kaloyanides.

Graduation Speakers

Avery Brook, Community Council president, delivered a short welcome address.

"The record attendance at homecoming and the spring musical, and the consistent support of the art department, our sports teams during every season, and numerous events and meetings of our clubs demonstrates how our class consistently celebrated so many of our unique talents," she said.

This year's graduation speakers talked a lot about passion and spirit as important qualities for graduates to value in life after high school.

In his speech, Brenner talked about those qualities:

When people are interviewed for a job, there are several character traits that are essential for employers to evaluate. Possibly the most essential are embodied in the following question: Is the person passionate and curious about what they do?

Let me explain why I think that applies:

I would suggest it means we are looking for a person who approaches all situations with enthusiasm regardless of the task, and that they possess an inquisitive mind that prompts them to question.

It means that if they are a doctor or lawyer they have a keen sense of commitment to provide each patient or client the best service possible and they are forever seeking new ways to do so. It means that if they are a teacher, they love to be around kids and are enthralled by the content area that they teach as they constantly seek new ways to challenge their students.

What makes this such a complicated task for employers is that this is not commonly a trait that is uncovered in an interview, nor it is one that can easily be taught. It is one that individuals must embody because it is who they are, not what they are told they have to be. There is nothing that substitutes for passion and curiosity.

Darien High School Principal Ellen Dunn focused in part on struggle, even failure, and resilience:

Today is a day fraught with contradictions. We want you to listen to us, but you must find your own voice. We want to protect you, but you must be free to make mistakes. We want you to avoid failure yet we know that failure will be your best teacher. We want your heart to be safe from harm yet we want you to know deep and abiding love. We don't want you to suffer the pain of loss but we want you to take risks for what is worth keeping. We want to hold on to you yet, like the butterfly, we know you must spread your wings. [...]

[T]he butterfly's design is perfected for flight and it struggles to emerge. At its most vulnerable, the struggle forces fluid into the wings giving them shape. Your struggles will shape you as well. Overcoming challenges builds the resilience that will sustain you. The challenges you face will fuel change and creativity and carve out new directions. With renewed perspective, you will emerge like the butterfly, stronger than before.

Valedictorian Komal Dhull spoke in part about spirit as a guide and goal rather than following a dry formula for success:

When I first began learning to play the piano, I saw sheet music as series of instructions to be followed without question— notes to be played in order and tempo, volume and mood dictated by a forte or legato above or below the bar. My job, I thought, was to follow these directions as written, and the result would be a beautifully played song.

Much in the same way, it's easy to get caught up in the view of life as a journey with a destination in mind, to believe that if you follow a specific series of steps you'll find a lucrative career, 2.5 kids and a white picket fence, or whichever definition of success it is you prefer, waiting for you at the end.

But neither music nor life is formulaic. As I moved to more difficult songs, my piano teacher gave me some advice: she told me to make the piece my own. She wanted me to add my own expression and emotion, instead of restricting myself to the instructions explicitly outlined in the music.

The audience, she said, would be unlikely to notice a minor rhythmic mistake, but they'd take note of the feelings I poured into my performance. It was more important to craft a meaningful story with the music than it was to be entirely correct.

This lesson, I've found, applies to much more than a piano recital.

Although we cannot always control what happens, each and every one of us has the power to shape what we take away from our experiences. We gain what we put into them: opportunities for growth and learning abound, if only we are willing to work for them — to wake up at 5 a.m. for that morning practice, to stay in on a sunny weekend afternoon to finish that paper, or to spend those extra hours with a piece of music.

Salutatorian Indira Flores talked about the importance of speaking up:

Google defines "self advocacy" as the action of representing one's self. I say that it's asking questions when you are unsure, voicing your opinions to others, and speaking up when you are uncomfortable with something.

When I was younger, there were many instances in which I failed to speak up for myself. I let group mates decide what work I had to do on projects, sat in situations that I didn't want to be in; only ever expressed what I wanted if someone directly asked me to do so.

Now I've gained the insight to begin doing better. Over the past few years, I've had some fascinating, eye-opening experiences doing internships in the medical field. [...]

I have learned the importance of my goals and intentions clear both to myself and to my supervisors at the beginning, so that we can both get the most out of my work.

I have learned that although it can be very intimidating to speak up in a new environment, it's better to feel that discomfort early on and address an issue right away than to quietly deal with it every single day. I know that a lot of us, including myself, are still working to become better at this. [...]

You are your own best advocate. When you're confused about an assignment, ask for clarification. When you're interested in an opportunity, bring it up and put yourself in the running for it. This applies to work, to hobbies, to friends to everything that you might want to pursue.

After the ceremony, attendees were invited into the student cafeteria, where an enormous amount of cookies, along with apple cider, was waiting.

On the commencement program, the Darien High School Parents Association, the Class of 2018 and the

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National Honor Society were given special thanks for their help with the event.