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Parade of emotion: Amherst teachers, students reconnect from a distance during closure

Justin Faulconer

Apr 1, 2020



A parade of teachers cheering up students from their vehicles drew plenty of smiles, waves and signs in the Elon community in late March.

Lee Luther Jr.

On the front windshield of Mandy Campbell's vehicle, a homemade poster with a hand-drawn image of a school building proclaimed: "I Love Elon!"

Moments earlier, her daughter, Karly, an Elon Elementary School student, leaned out of the vehicle's sunroof and waved at her teacher and other educators at the school. Karly and her mother were part of a parade of vehicles driven by educators that passed

through the parking lot of Elon Presbyterian Church last Thursday.

Teachers leaned out the windows to wave and engage in short conversations with the kids and their parents. The reunion, while brief and at a distance, was sweet and heartfelt.

“It gives them a sense of normalcy,” Mandy Campbell said of her daughter, a first-grader, and her friends interacting with the teachers. “They miss them.”

A few days earlier, Gov. Ralph Northam ordered all K-12 schools in the state, public and private, to shut down due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus for the remainder of the school year. The pandemic has dramatically altered the way of life in Amherst as many have lost their jobs or suffered a financial loss, businesses have taken hits, social distancing has become commonplace and families have been forced to make major adjustments in their everyday routines.

The number of coronavirus cases is up to 1,250, according to the Virginia Department of Health. The newest figures, released Tuesday, also show 13,401 people have been tested, 165 have been hospitalized and 27 have died. Locally, Lynchburg has four cases, Amherst County has three and Bedford and Nelson counties each have two, according to the state health department.

Many businesses have shut down or are at a limited capacity due to the pandemic. Gov. Ralph Northam on Monday issued a stay-at-home order directing all Virginians to remain home except for extremely limited circumstances.

Mandy Campbell has worked from home during the crisis and said the lack of school has been stressful. The separation from Elon Elementary particularly is painful because the school is the cornerstone of the close-knit community, she said.

“It’s really important to us and our family,” Campbell said of the school and the many close relationships it generates. “They treat our kids like family while they’re there.”

The Elon Elementary vehicle parade route stretched down surrounding streets and roads and took about an hour to complete, according to a flyer for the event. On Hunt Club Drive, about a mile from Elon Presbyterian, some mailboxes in the neighborhood were adorned with balloons and signs waiting to greet the educators improvising to bring some cheer to their students who can't come into the classrooms.

Campbell said in addition to the void of seeing the teachers her kids miss seeing their friends on a daily basis. The abrupt, unprecedented end to the school year in March has been a roller coaster of emotions for families.

“When they realized this was it and they wouldn't be going to school the rest of the year it did upset them,” Campbell said.

Jennifer Berry, whose children attend Elon Elementary, fought back tears after the happy moments her family shared with the educators during a parade stop.

“She's missing her fifth-grade graduation and her field day,” she said of her daughter, Casey. “I just feel like her last year of elementary school was taken from her.”

Kevin Berry, her husband, said the teachers and students at Elon Elementary have a close bond.

“It puts a little light on a bad moment,” he said of the children getting some face time. “It's pretty awesome how the teachers and the kids feel that way about each other.”

“We've had lots of tears at our house,” Jennifer Berry said of the separation.

Her son, Cody, a third-grader, drew a poster that included a hand-drawn image of a chicken. Jennifer Berry said with a laugh one of his teachers owns chickens, which served as his inspiration for the drawing.

Jennifer Berry said Amherst County Public Schools “stepped up their game” with providing families with Chromebook laptop computers and flash drives of material to keep them learning while on the long break. “They are doing so much for the kids still,” she said.

The nurse said the sudden reality of having to help provide education to her children while at home is a challenge.

“I love the teachers,” she said. “I could never do what they do.”

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https://newsadvance.com/new_era_progress/news/we-were-all-devastated-achs-seniors-almost-at-the-finish-line-reflect-on-pandemics-interruption/article_f39f90a6-cc64-5781-8f0d-25eb1a1ee4ec.html

'We were all devastated': ACHS seniors, almost at the finish line, reflect on pandemic's interruption

Justin Faulconer
May 6, 2020



Amherst County High School Principal Derrick Brown crowns Trinity Moon the Homecoming Queen during halftime during the October 2019 Lancer football game against Brookville.

Lee Luther Jr.

When Summer Hensley came up just a second or two short of a longtime goal of qualifying for state competition in outdoor track last year, her frustration subsided.

“There is next season,” the Amherst County High School senior told herself.

The once comforting thought, a phrase commonly spoken in sports fields and arenas throughout the nation, suddenly and harshly became a mute point when the effects of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, closed down schools and shuttered the spring sport season in March.

The feeling was surreal, and the following weeks of isolation from her classmates made it more difficult to stay motivated without others to run with, she said.

“It’s just kind of crazy. We didn’t know it was possibly the last time we’d see each other,” she said of life as usual coming to a halt at ACHS. “I felt sort of directionless. I had to come up with a new goal.”

Her aspiration now is preparing to run a 13.1-mile half-marathon as soon as she gets the opportunity. She embraces a quote from her favorite athlete, Kenya long-distance runner Eliud Kipchoge, the world’s record holder in the marathon: “100% of me is nothing compared to 1% of the whole team.”

“I just sort of have come to peace with it now,” Hensley said of coping with the stay-at-home order to prevent further spread of the virus. “It’s rough, but it helps to know everyone is having to go through it and to know we are doing it for a reason. I don’t like to be ordered around, but I know it’s for a good cause.”

Amherst County High’s Class of 2020 is dealing with challenges like no other student body before. They have missed out on their prom, various senior night events, ceremonies, personal triumphs on the field and other special moments.

Chase Smith, a senior who has sang in the Amerechos show choir her four years, recalled the group winning a competition at Thomas Dale High School in Chester and later finding out schools were closed for the remainder of the year with two major

performances remaining.

“We were all devastated,” Smith said. “We were talking about how we came in first, we went out on a high note, but felt robbed of the last two experiences.”

Missing out on the May 16 prom especially stings, she said.

“All of my friends would not stop talking about it,” she said of the much-anticipated event. “It was one last hurrah, one last party. We had been planning for it since senior year started.”

Despite the disappointment, she is striving to stay positive while at home.

“For me, I just try to find something new to do each day,” Smith said. “Some days I paint, sometimes I spend time with my dog, Peyton, and be active as much as possible. I try not to be a homebody ... it’s hard for me to do because I’m very extroverted. Not being around my friends is hard to do but I’m doing my best and learning as I go.”

‘We’re all just kind of waiting’

Senior Caroline Branham also had excitement for her part as a nun in the spring musical ‘Sister Act’ that was called off, and bought her prom dress in December. “My friends and I have been talking about it months upon months,” Branham said.

The seniors in the theater program are a tight knit group and not sharing the final show was painful, she said. “We’ve all been together for so long. It’s very bittersweet,” she said of the end of her theater experience at ACHS.

While students are keeping in touch with friends from a distance by phone, social media and online, Branham said she misses interacting with her teachers and administrators in person. The relationships are close, she said while describing how assistant principal Joey Crawford taught her in ninth grade and was a chaperone on a past field trip to Europe.

“This was the time I really wanted to go to school,” Branham lamented of missing out on the senior year home stretch.

Smith, who will attend Old Dominion University with plans to major in communications and minor in music, said she cherishes memories fresh in her mind from singing on stage as an Amerecho and editing the school newspaper. “Just being on stage and being my most authentic self, I’m in the best mood,” she said of her love for show choir, which she describes as a big happy family. “I want to keep on pursuing music some way.”

Hopeful for memorable experiences to share in some way with her classmates for graduation amid such uncertainty, Smith said Principal Derrick Brown made the year feel special while it lasted and built a close connection with the students.

“He even did a tailgate for seniors – that was really fun,” Smith said. “My senior year was amazing because of him. He made sure everything was perfect for us.”

Branham was working at Rehab Associates of Central Virginia in Amherst, where she had interned since January as a technician prior to the state’s lockdown, and plans to major in human nutrition, food and exercise at Virginia Tech.

Even if it’s pushed into summer months, she’s hopeful for the time the seniors can reunite in person. She also is optimistic of a meaningful graduation experience in some form.

“We all worked so hard,” Branham said.

The pause has been tough and her older sister, Kendall, a 2016 alumna of ACHS who is set to graduate from the College of William and Mary this year, in seeking closure to her experiences, Caroline Branham said.

“We’re all kind of waiting,” she said.

Hensley, who remains active on the Lancers Tech Club, plans to help record video lessons with teachers while maintaining social distancing. The crisis reminds her of the April 2018 tornado that devastated portions of Amherst County and led to an outpouring of community outreach in helping the affected residents recover.

Hensley recalls going to her English teacher's house, which received heavy damage from the tornado, to help with the cleanup and how students took part in rallying for recovery. She believes the Amherst community will weather this storm as well.

"I see a lot of the same things happening right now and that's awesome to witness," she said of community spirit in hard times.

Hensley hopes to major in electrical engineering and mathematics at Virginia Tech and is hopeful to get the opportunity for closure to her ACHS experience down the road.

"There are a lot bad things happening right now, but there's some good," she said of coping with the pandemic.

Empty hallways, full spirits

Without school in session, David Pugh, a member of the Amherst County Board of Supervisors, said he has found himself involved much more than usual in his children's learning in the evening.

One silver lining to not lose sight of in such difficult times is families are spending more time together, Pugh said.

He feels for the teachers, students and families who can't be together during such an exciting time of the school year and appreciates what educators do a daily basis.

"It's definitely stressful, and I'm glad I'm not a teacher," Pugh said.

Nearing the end of his first year at the helm of ACHS, Brown said he misses the students and the biggest adjustment educators have made is the mindset to best support them without their physical presence.

"A school without students in the hallways is like an art gallery without art," Brown said. "Our students are the reason we get up in the morning. They fuel our passion and drive our decisions."

Teachers and staff have been creative in designing lessons for students at home in finishing out the year. “I know we will recover from this crisis and we will learn together again,” Brown said. “Things may look different on the other side, but we will overcome every obstacle together.”

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https://newsadvance.com/new_era_progress/news/its-just-my-joy-amelon-kindergarten-teacher-stays-connected-with-students-daily-during-pandemic/article_cb08e099-e53d-5a93-8569-e29a40ef7558.html

'It's just my joy': Amelon kindergarten teacher stays connected with students daily during pandemic

Justin Faulconer
May 13, 2020



Amelon Elementary School teacher Melita Ring shows a book so her students watching her lessons at home get an up close view on May 8. Ring held regular communications with students online in the few months after schools were closed March 13 because of COVID-19.

Lee Luther Jr.

Though schools have been closed nearly two months in Amherst County because of the coronavirus, Amelon Elementary School kindergarten teacher Melita Ring has managed to keep regular face time with her students.

The 19-year veteran at Amelon Elementary said after schools were ordered closed March 13 she immediately began reaching out to students online through social media. She regularly has used Zoom, Facebook and Google Meet to read to her students and kept them versed in several subjects.

Her goal was to connect the students to a person they recognize for a sense of normalcy in a very uncertain time and make them feel at ease with learning while away from the classroom. She has read books and included math and other subjects when possible using household items such as playing cards.

“Just so they can have things that were already at home and do some learning there,” Ring said.

She’s also talked with students about losing teeth and included that in the online discussions.

“I’ve opened my home and I’m so happy I get to connect with most of my children on a weekly basis,” she said on the online interactions.

She sets aside times three days a week to read stories to the students, along with other daily interactions. Ring said it’s important to read to them because it helps them grasp the subject through voice and expressions.

Her goal is to make the stories come alive for the children and bridge the gap of missing the classroom setting. “Reading to the children is an opportunity,” Ring said following a reading on May 8. “We talked about a spinning wheel today.”

She loves giving of her personal time with many of the lessons.

“That’s my favorite part of my day at school,” said Ring. “I love reading to them and making stories come alive. That’s what teaches them to have their inner voice when they’re reading. It’s just my joy to do that.”

She said the interactions helps her balance out her own work with her children, a fifth-grader and eighth-grader, while they too are home bound.

The online lessons are well-received among students and parents are helpful in making sure they join in for the half-hour reading sessions.

“They interact well, they seem to stay focused and engaged,” Ring said. “I feel like it’s gone very well. They can see me and see learning is part of their life. Learning doesn’t stop.”

Ring said she will continue the online interactions through the end of May. She has spent the majority of her time at Amelon, 17 years, teaching kindergarten and spent two years prior teaching first grade there.

Principal Jay Sales describes Ring as the epitome of professionalism who personifies the “just like family” theme Amelon has cultivated.

“As one of our team leaders, I’m not at all surprised by the instructional leadership she has demonstrated during these tumultuous times created by the coronavirus,” Sales said. “Perhaps the only silver lining of this virus is that it has fostered innovative teaching techniques as related to distance learning. Mrs. Ring is a beacon for her fellow colleagues in the greater Amherst County community. Her colleagues marvel at her performance — and the parent feedback has been nothing short of grateful. We are certainly appreciative of her service.”

Ring said the void of not seeing her students stings and she had to pull herself up by her bootstraps and get creative in helping them succeed.

“It definitely leaves an ache in your heart because seeing them daily and engaging with them is where the learning takes place,” Ring said. “It’s definitely hard and hurts not seeing them. Being a positive light to them in these times of uncertainty, that’s been my goal.”

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