

'Bright eyes, big dreams, open hearts': Amherst high school celebrates graduation

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Graduates stand before taking their seats for the Amherst County High School graduation ceremony at the Vines Center on Friday, May 27, 2022. Kendall Warner photos, the New Era-Progress

Amherst County High School senior class president Isaiah Idore recalled a conversation four years ago with a senior who told him to embrace high school and leave no regrets because the experience happens so fast.

Idore said he said “whatever” at the time, like any 14-year-old would without thinking much about it, but it wasn’t until he took his last snap in football and made his final layup in basketball that it hit him his high school years were coming to an end.

“Time moves fast, folks, and it doesn’t stop for anyone,” Idore told a crowd of several thousand gathered at Liberty University’s Vines Center on May 27 for the Amherst school’s 66th graduation ceremony.

Idore spoke fondly of the countless nights of study, the Standards of Learning tests, cramped hands from writing and often falling asleep in front of his computer screen. He said graduating is a happy day for some and bittersweet for others.

“This is a huge milestone in our lives to set us up in a journey where anything is possible,” Idore said. “We worked to write this chapter of our life, a chapter full of growth, finding yourself and who you’re going to be.”

Idore thanked teachers, administrators and counselors who mentored and guided the senior class and for their long hours on the job and tenacity.

“I truly believe you men and women are the heroes unspoken of,” Idore said.

He encouraged graduates to be proud of earning their diplomas and say to themselves “Heck yeah, I did that.”

“The laughs we shared will be remembered forever in my heart,” Idore said. “Deep down we’ll always be Lancers who rise to the challenges we face.”

Salutatorian Erin Coffey also thanked educators in Amherst who have done so much for the students the past four years and her family for getting her through.

“A big part of these past four years has been about discovering who we are and how to express ourselves in a way that makes us the most happy,” said Coffey. “I learned the value of building relationships.”

The class is the third to graduate during the pandemic and experienced a ceremony that was a return to normalcy from past years prior to the COVID-19 and the first at the Vines Center arena, where the event had been held many consistent years prior, since 2019.

Several student speakers and ACHS Principal Derrick Brown touched on the pandemic’s effects on the seniors who were sophomores when their year was upended with school closures in mid-March 2020. Coffey spoke of the hybrid schedule of in-person and remote learning in the 2020-21 school year.

Coffey said she learned unique life lessons from those around her and urged classmates to discover themselves, forge relationships and have no regrets.

She said her own regrets were learning experiences in her journey.

“I learned about my own weaknesses and strengths and the best way for me to personally overcome adversity,” said Coffey.

Valedictorian Ella Lewis said the seniors’ time in high school has been about so much more than simply going to class each day.

“We learned more about ourselves and each other than any score on a test could ever measure,” said Lewis. “We’ve come to rely on each other even more than we realize. We faced obstacles, a pandemic and tornado warnings on graduation morning.”

Lewis said she dreamt of making the speech on graduation since fifth grade and if she could back and tell that girl anything it would be not to worry so much.

“I’ve learned this year there is so much more to us than letters on a transcript,” said Lewis. “During high school, we’ve had the opportunity to truly discover ourselves, the good and the bad.”

She said the seniors are ready for the next step in life, whether they realize it or not.

“Many, many pictures will be taken tonight,” Lewis said. “Let that serve as a reminder that life is a collection of snapshots.”

Lewis said he hopes the seniors are proud of what they accomplished.

“I hope we look forward to the future with bright eyes, big dreams and open hearts,” said Lewis. “But I also hope we never forget the road that got us here. “

Brown said the class has persevered and sacrificed.

“Not even two tornado warnings could stop you,” Brown said of the evening’s rainy conditions.

Brown said the seniors have come through the most trying school year the Amherst County Public Schools division has experienced and spoke of the class's resilience and rising up.

The most influential people in their lives aren't the ones who seem perfect and never struggle but the ones who keep failing, trying, stumbling but moving forward, who fall down and get back up and keep fighting, Brown said.

"Despite every disappointment and every rejection, they continue to rise," Brown told seniors. "They never quit and they're resilient. Those are the people that you learn from the most and that's the type of character I see in all of you."

He urged students to stay positive when they experience highs and lows and life gets rough.

"...When the walls come crashing around you, look for the good, pick up those pieces and rebuild from the rubble. Always follow your passions," said Brown. You will face trials but I know you will persevere. You will excel, you will be resilient, you will be intentional, you will be excellent, and you will continue to rise, because you are Lancers and that's what Lancers do. We rise."