

On your mark, get set, graduate!

Notre Dame graduates cross finish line at Pocono Raceway

LONG POND – Members of the Notre Dame High School Class of 2020 had their promising futures put on the “fast track” and were given the opportunity for one final “victory lap” – literally – as the Pocono Raceway welcomed the Catholic school community from East Stroudsburg for its commencement on May 30, 2020.

The Notre Dame graduation was the first of several commencement celebrations at the tricky triangle. The racetrack graciously offered to open its doors to any school so that graduation ceremonies could take place with recommended guidelines for social distancing.

Consisting of four parts – Baccalaureate, Senior Awards, Conferring of Diplomas and a Congratulatory (Victory) Lap – the Saturday morning graduation ceremony had the Notre Dame Class of 2020 along with family members and friends take part while remaining in their personal vehicles.

“It was awesome. It was so much fun. I had a total blast. It was really great and even better than I could have ever imagined,” graduate Nicole Siciliano of East Stroudsburg said after taking her victory lap.

As the name of each of the 51 graduates was announced, the senior’s photo was displayed on the Raceway’s video board. The graduate’s vehicle then proceeded to the track to line up behind the Pocono Pace Car, which led all the vehicles for a “victory lap” around the raceway’s signature triangle loop, and ultimately to the “finish line” to dramatically conclude the ceremony – and the Notre Dame graduates’ high school experience.

Graduate Bailey Reilly’s vehicle stood out in the crowd. The top of her car was decorated with a mortarboard and a large makeshift mask was placed on the front hood.

“I wanted to be as creative as I could be. I wanted to make a lasting impression on my classmates and their family and friends,”



Graduate cars fill the Pocono Raceway for the Notre Dame High School Class of 2020 graduation ceremony which was held on Saturday, May 30, 2020. (Photos/Eric Deabill)

the Saylorburg graduate said.

Reilly added that she thinks she enjoyed the Pocono Raceway graduation more than she would have if it was a regular commencement.

“I loved that we were on the Jumbo-Tron. I loved that we could have all of our friends and family park behind us and they’d be able to see us on the Jumbo-Tron. My favorite part was taking the lap around the Pocono Raceway. I loved that,” she added.

The unique commencement ceremony was witnessed by Bishop Joseph C. Bambera, who was on hand to offer remarks and benediction, all while Blue Ridge Cable Television provided video coverage of the event.

“As we looked for options for graduation during these uncertain and challenging times, we wanted to ensure our students had an experience to remember as they move onto their next chapter,” Jeffrey Lyons, principal of Notre Dame High School, said. “We found a great partner with Pocono Raceway in order to make this a reality and are grateful that they allowed us to use their facility. We are also thankful to

Blue Ridge Cable for their generous offer to provide technical support to carry out this special graduation ceremony.”

The longtime Catholic school principal recalled the truncated academic year and the final days of normalcy in March, which at least saw the district-champion Notre Dame Mock Trial Team compete in the regional finals.

“But everything stopped two days after that,” he said. “Fortunately the Diocesan Office of Catholic Schools reacted very quickly and distance learning began immediately, with Google Classroom and all its possibilities.”

This year’s Notre Dame graduating class proved exceptional in its academic accomplishments and boasted five valedictorians for scholarly excellence. They include: Kevin Castner Jr. of Easton; Alexander Fouad of Stroudsburg; Colin Kissell of Cresco; Justin Peeney of Stroudsburg; and Bianca Pigon of East Stroudsburg.

Each provided a brief speech for the commencement ceremony.

“I know all of you are capable of

success beyond your wildest dreams. The only variable in that equation for success is you. I hope all of you can find your favorite part of this treat we call life,” Kevin Castner said during his speech.

“A piece of advice to my class: cherish what you have and remember what you had. Remember high school for what it was – a building block for our lives, a place to discover ourselves, and a place to learn from others,” Alexander Fouad said.

“Our time together at Notre Dame ended abruptly, and I know that not one of us feels that was fair. The best thing to do now is to look back at fond memories and impressive accomplishments with a smile and pride,” Colin Kissell added.

“Class of 2020, I encourage you to break out of your comfort zone as you move on from Notre Dame High School. Surround yourself with people who support you, and don’t forget to be that support for everyone else. Try something new, seize opportunities, and create adventures,” Justin Peeney said during his remarks.

“I would like to point out that Notre Dame’s Class of 2020 is the best at adapting to new and uncharted situations. I remember our teachers calling us ‘the guinea pigs’ of Notre Dame because if there was a new schedule set in place, a new teacher or a new class, our class was seemingly the group to experience it first. We never expected to get hit with a curveball during our last months of senior year, and we never thought we would be graduating on Pocono Raceway either,” Bianca Pigon said.

Forty-eight members of the Class of 2020 will attend institutions of higher learning, 11 of whom will do so at Catholic colleges/universities. Two graduates will enter the work force and one plans to pursue military service.

Notre Dame seniors merited a total of 136 scholarship awards worth nearly \$6.8 million.



Bishop Joseph C. Bambera hands a diploma to a Notre Dame graduate trackside during the Class of 2020 commencement ceremony at Pocono Raceway.



Bailey Reilly of Saylorburg drives across the finish line at the Pocono Raceway. Reilly decorated the top of her car with a Notre Dame mortarboard and placed a mask on the front hood.

PA Catholic Conference urges Wolf administration to not divert CARES Act funding from private schools

HARRISBURG — The Pennsylvania Catholic Conference is urging Governor Tom Wolf to halt his administration's efforts to divert federal CARES Act money away from private schools.

The governor and the Pennsylvania Department of Education are looking to take away most of the funding for private schools that Congress wants distributed equitably in COVID-19 relief to ALL schools in Pennsylvania and across the country.

Pennsylvania received \$471

million in funding from Washington D.C., but PCC Education Director Sean McAleer says, "The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) created its own set of rules to distribute that money that blatantly ignores federal guidance. The end result significantly lowers the amounts to be given to Catholic and nonpublic school students."

McAleer broke down the disparity this way, saying, "the Wolf Administration is calling for roughly \$19 million to go to Catholic and nonpublic

school students, while Washington is calling for \$66 million. The Wolf administration is misappropriating some \$47 million in federal funds and harming families who have chosen to send their children to Catholic and nonpublic schools."

"Catholic and nonpublic school students matter," McAleer added. "Mr. Wolf, please follow the federal guidelines! In a time when thousands of Pennsylvania's children and families are suffering and struggling to make ends meet, the administration has chosen

to cause further harm by refusing to allocate money as directed by the federal government."

For more information on this issue, including ways to submit an online letter to the Governor's office as well as Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera, visit www.pacatholic.org.

The Pennsylvania Catholic Conference is based in Harrisburg and is the public affairs arm of Pennsylvania's Catholic bishops.

"Our class is a family"

Saint John Neumann Regional Academy graduates told to serve generously

WILLIAMSPORT — As pictures of each Saint John Neumann Regional Academy graduate flashed across a projection screen, the theme of the Class of 2020 commencement instantly became clear.

"Our class is literally a family," valedictorian Josiah Reid of Linden said, speaking on behalf of the 13 graduates. "We eat lunch together. We have conversations about life. We share laughs. We learn how to cooperate with each other and utilize our abilities. But most importantly, we create memories that will forever be encrypted in our minds."

The Thursday, May 28, 2020, ceremony, which was held at Saint Boniface Church, was unlike any in the school's history. In addition to mortarboards and tassels, many of the graduates wore a face mask with the school's logo and maintained six foot social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because of the coronavirus, the last time the students were physically together in a classroom setting was Friday, March 13, 2020. The school quickly transitioned to distance learning to finish out the academic year virtually.

"We lost nearly half of our last year together, but I think it only brought us closer together," Reid said emphasizing the importance of graduation night. "We wanted to be together because we realized how much we missed each other, how weird it was to not see our closest friends every day, and how



The Class of 2020 commencement ceremony for Saint John Neumann Regional Academy was held Thursday, May 28, 2020, at Saint Boniface Church in Williamsport. (Photos/David Miller)

important it is to show one another how much we appreciate them."

Eight of the graduating seniors will attend Penn State University next year. Some of the other schools that students will attend are Lycoming College, East Stroudsburg University and Central Penn College. At least one graduate plans to immediately enter the workforce.

In welcoming her classmates to the commencement ceremony, salutatorian Maria Helminiak of Williamsport noted this year's graduation is unique not just because of the COVID-19 circumstances.

"This is a very important year for Saint John Neumann High School. We are the 50th class to graduate from this school. The unusual circumstances of the past few months have made our journey

as seniors quite memorable in ways we are sure no other Neumann senior class experienced."

Instead of finishing their senior year with get-togethers and sporting events, Helminiak explained how the Class of 2020 has been forced to spend its final weeks away from each other.

"We took seeing our friends and going to school for granted, but this situation has shown us how much we should appreciate those moments," she added.

Bishop Joseph C. Bambera, Catholic Schools Superintendent Kristen Donohue, Principal Alisia McNamee and Father Bert Kozen also addressed the graduating class.

"Tonight's ceremony might look different but it doesn't diminish your accomplishments," McNamee told graduates. "You



The graduates from Saint John Neumann Regional Academy participate in a "cap toss" following the conclusion of the commencement ceremony in Williamsport.

are family, today, tomorrow and always."

Acknowledging the unique circumstances of the commencement, Father Kozen told the graduates, "It will certainly be memorable."

Highlighting the benefits of their Catholic education, Donohue said each graduate from Saint John Neumann Regional Academy is uniquely prepared for the future. She encouraged the Class of 2020 to be creative, think critically and set goals that are meaningful.

"You are all very impressive... We are so immensely proud of you," Donohue noted.

Bishop Bambera echoed that praise for the graduates. In the midst of upheaval, concern and fear with the coronavirus, he challenged the graduates to leave their mark on society.

"We need you and your gifts in our world and in our lives. We need your hope. We need your enthusiasm. We need your determination and your generous spirits and we need your faith," Bishop Bambera said.

The bishop encouraged members of the graduating class to be men and women who are concerned about others, who serve generously and are accepting of outsiders.

"You have been entrusted at Saint John Neumann with the values of the Gospel of Jesus, values that set you apart and values that make you who you are as Christians," Bishop Bambera added.

Members of the Class of 2020 from Saint John Neumann have been awarded a total of 24 scholarships, with a total value of \$842,893.

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton Award

The Diocese of Scranton Catholic Schools Office recognizes these Seton Award winners for their achievement on the high school entrance examination and their enrollment in a Diocesan high school for the 2020-2021 school year. Families of these individuals are commended for their commitment to Catholic education, and the students are congratulated for this distinguished honor. For these students and for all young people in our Catholic schools, Catholic education impacts their formation by incorporating a strong emphasis on the spiritual that is evident in all components of the learning process. Our vision for these students is to provide them an educational experience that promotes a lifelong learning in the faith, and one that prepared them to be responsible, competent, and confident persons as citizens of our country and world. In addition, our schools are dedicated to providing a loving, safe and nurturing environment where the young learn respect for themselves and for all persons.



Ryan Georgetti
All Saints Academy



Payton Sutryk
Epiphany School



Jordan Lech
Good Shepherd Academy



Nicole Yencha
Holy Rosary School



Joseph Nguyen
Monsignor McHugh School



Carlos Vergara
Notre Dame Elementary
School



Luke Mozeleski
All Saints Academy



Julia Desciak
Good Shepherd Academy



Anna Lombardo
Holy Family Academy



Gillian Idhaw
La Salle Academy



Daniel Bordas
Notre Dame Elementary
School



Emily Brown
Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High
School



Regan McDaniel
Epiphany School



Alyssa Evans
Good Shepherd Academy



Sophia Lombardo
Holy Family Academy



Benjamin Mulvey
La Salle Academy



Krystie Bordne
Notre Dame Elementary
School



Isabella Siciliano
Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High
School



Alan R. Seaberg III
Epiphany School



Hannah Jones
Good Shepherd Academy



Abigail Miller
Holy Rosary School



Daton Lorenzo
Monsignor McHugh School



Matt Jankowski
Notre Dame Elementary
School



To the students who have benefited from a Catholic education, and to those who continue their educational journey in a Catholic environment, we salute you and pray that God, through the intercession of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, guides you in

Faith, Hope and Love.



Jessica Torres
Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High School



Angelena Montefour
Our Lady of Peace School



Clark Bower
St. John Neumann Elementary School



Lainey Conway
St. Jude School



Brady Fallon
St. Nicholas/St. Mary School



Garrett J. Kone
St. Agnes School



Natalie Van De Loecht
Notre Dame Jr./Sr. High School



Cullen Moran
St. Clare/St. Paul School



Dylan Hartz
St. John Neumann Elementary School



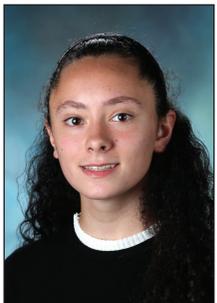
Donato Strish
St. Jude School



Ava Conrad
St. Nicholas/St. Mary School



Aislyn R. Strange
St. Agnes School



Isabella Bagnuolo
Our Lady of Peace School



Brayden Sherry
St. Clare/St. Paul School



Gabriel Cendoma
St. John Neumann Jr./Sr. High School



Lillie Kochis
St. Mary of Mount Carmel School



Christopher Durko
St. Nicholas/St. Mary School



Jaden Exter
Wyoming Area Catholic School



Rachel Fay
Our Lady of Peace School



Abigail Thompson
St. Clare/St. Paul School



Emma Gallew
St. John Neumann Jr./Sr. High School



Christopher Petrucci
St. Mary of Mount Carmel School



Jacob Ohrin
St. Nicholas/St. Mary School



Talia Lasota
Wyoming Area Catholic School