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'I didn't get to say goodbye': Graduating seniors grapple with unexpected ending to their high school careers

Many outgoing students say they have mostly come to terms with what they have no control over: a global pandemic

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by Elena Kadwany / Palo Alto Weekly

Liza Kolbasov has been stacking old homework assignments, tests and notes on a shelf in her closet since her freshman year in anticipation of throwing them into the air with her classmates on the last day of school, a treasured end-of-year tradition for Gunn High School seniors.

But with school closed, the paper toss won't be happening this year — nor the senior picnic, baccalaureate, awards night, yearbook signings and other rites of passage that students look forward to for much of their educational careers.

Some local high schools have decided to postpone the most significant of those celebrations, graduation, in the hopes they will be able to mark that milestone with seniors and their families in person later this year, while other schools are planning virtual commencements.

Schools and students are organizing socially distant replacements for events, including virtual awards nights and, in Palo Alto, a "shout out" in residential front yards for seniors on what would have been graduation night for the city's two public high schools.

In interviews, Midpeninsula seniors expressed disappointment at how the coronavirus has upended their final chapter of high school and all the traditions that come with it. But the most difficult pill to swallow, they said, is the lost time with friends and classmates. They left their campuses in March not knowing they wouldn't return.

"The things I'm the most missing right now aren't actually the specific traditions but the fact I'm never going to see 95% of my class again," Kolbasov said. "I didn't get to say goodbye to them. I'm ... not getting to savor that last bit of time that we're supposed to have."

For Paula Sias of Mountain View High School, senior year represented the final chapter of her childhood. There were a lot of tearful FaceTime sessions with friends when they found out they wouldn't be able to celebrate that time together, in person.

"Senior year is supposed to be the best year of high school. We go through 12-plus years of schooling awaiting that final year and all the fun things it entails," she said. "Senior year is the last year you get to spend with your friends ... those everlasting memories of our childhood that we get to carry on with us throughout our life."

A member of the track team, Sias had long pictured herself walking down the track field on senior night and proudly announcing where she's going to college (the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where she plans



Palo Alto residents have put up yard signs congratulating the Palo Alto High School Class of 2020. Photo by Magali Gauthier.



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to study education). She also was looking forward to a senior trip to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk.

One anticipated time with friends — prom night — has already come and gone.

Mountain View High School senior Jonathan Liu said he had an elaborate "promposal" planned — including an original song — before the pandemic struck. He was looking forward to prom as well as graduation.

"These are the events that I feel are the heart of the high school experience, events that everybody remembers long after they have graduated. Not having these once-in-a-lifetime experiences is a real bummer since I can't help wondering 'What if?'" he said.

Menlo-Atherton's student activities director and student leaders floated the idea of a virtual prom to students, but it wasn't a popular one, Menlo-Atherton Principal Simone Rick-Kennel said. Administrators hope to gather the class of 2020 for a prom or celebration in the future.

Some seniors decided to don their already purchased prom outfits and take socially distant photos, or they got together over Zoom on what would have been prom night. For students who couldn't attend prom in their junior year or planned to only go senior year because of the expense, the cancellation of this event was particularly disappointing.

Seniors also have had to forego other end-of-year competitions and events. Liu has acted in every play and musical the school has put on and to not bring that experience to a close was "disheartening." Gunn theater students found out their final production was canceled the same day it was set to take place. Others are missing their final debate tournaments, robotics competitions or athletic events.

Paly students and administrators have planned a series of remote celebrations for what would have been the last week of school, including a virtual paper toss held on Zoom and organizing times to say online goodbyes to teachers and staff. On June 3, for the citywide "shout out," they're asking people across Palo Alto to decorate their front yards and go outside at 5:30 p.m. to shout congratulations for the Class of 2020.

Frida Rivera, Paly's senior class president, has been involved in the planning of these events. She acknowledged none of them are adequate replacements for what seniors expected to have in person but said they're the "best possible outcome."

Staff at the Madrono, Paly's yearbook, don't yet know how or when the yearbook they've been working on for months will be safely distributed, but they've been adjusting its pages to reflect an unprecedented moment in history. A timeline with local and global events now includes dates of when schools closed and major events related to the coronavirus.

Instead of the usual photos of students together for the "senior superlatives" feature, which honors pairs of seniors in categories like "most likely to become president" and "most likely to be late to graduation," the yearbook staff is creating drawings of the winners. Clubs that hadn't yet submitted photos have sent in group Zoom screenshots.

Students at Palo Alto, Mountain View and Los Altos high schools also have used Instagram to highlight seniors' post-high school plans. Rivera said some students responded to Paly's Instagram feature in unexpected ways that she appreciated: One senior said his post-high school plans were simply to "be awesome." Another one? "Write a novel."

Celebrating post-high school plans amid a cloud of uncertainty

The next chapter for many high school seniors — college — is still hanging in the balance as colleges and universities across the country figure out what school will look like in the fall. The University of California has indicated it could reopen just one-third to one-half of dorm rooms. Other colleges are planning for hybrid models with a mix of virtual and in-person instruction.

It's top of mind for all seniors.

"There are two topics you can talk about right now: college and coronavirus," Kolbasov joked.

Many seniors received news about their college admissions during the shelter in place. Some said it was a relief not to be surrounded by peers talking about their acceptances on campus and nervously monitoring their inboxes for news during class.

Kolbasov is planning to attend Brown University in Rhode Island to study English and psychology. Brown was her first choice, but she seriously considered attending a California school instead because of the uncertainty around travel due to the virus. She said some friends are considering taking gap years for this reason.

"I think almost everybody thought about the impact of this on their college decision," she said. "Ultimately I decided the rest of college, being where I've wanted to go for so long, is worth it. I don't want to regret closing that opportunity once we are hopefully on campus."

Sias said she's considering going to Foothill College in Los Altos Hills for her freshman year if she can't attend college in person — for her, the cost of full tuition for online classes wouldn't be worth it.

Hanna Suh, a Gunn High School senior, has been nervously monitoring the coronavirus case count in New York City, where she plans to attend New York University in the fall.

"I've gotten into this new routine of getting up in the morning, picking up The New York Times and seeing their daily coronavirus stats out of anxiety of whether I can go to college in the fall," she said.

Graduating without the usual pomp or circumstance

With the end of the school year fast approaching, most high schools have wrestled with the agonizing decision of what to do with commencement and landed on a plan, either to move it online or reschedule it months from now.

Many local seniors overwhelmingly opposed a virtual graduation, which some said would be "anti-climatic" and even "sad."

Palo Alto High School senior Ben Knopper said he's glad his [school district postponed graduation until December](#).

"It gives us a chance to celebrate, to meet back up and say goodbye one more time," he said. "I'm hoping it acts more as a six-month reunion."

The Mountain View Los Altos High School District is also hoping to schedule an in-person graduation later this year. Los Altos High School has postponed prom until Aug. 7, with a backup date set for Nov. 25.

Menlo-Atherton plans to livestream a virtual commencement ceremony on June 4 at 4 p.m. Students can also still order caps and gowns, and some have talked about walking down the street in their caps and gowns together. At the end of the ceremony, once students are pronounced graduates, the school is asking them and their families to go outside and cheer loudly to honor the seniors (following all social distancing guidelines).

Kylie Wong, a Menlo-Atherton senior who plans to attend the University of Oregon in the fall, said that while disappointed not to have an in-person ceremony, "I know that the school's administration is doing its best with the current conditions."

She noted that a unique, longstanding tradition at M-A will be lost this year: Seniors choose a teacher or staff member who was important to them to present them with their diploma.

"During the first (fall) semester, there was consideration to remove this process, but students rallied together to keep this special aspect of graduation," she wrote in an email. "Ironically, the current situation unraveled graduation plans including the teacher-diploma component."

The school will keep the possibility of an in-person ceremony open depending on when the school can safely gather large crowds again, M-A principal Rick-Kennel said.

"Send positive messaging to seniors," Rick-Kennel said in a communication to students. "They have a sense of loss and we need to be their cheerleaders. What will help is acknowledging this with positivity and support."

Woodside High School's virtual ceremony will include a pre-recorded rendition of pomp and circumstance; student and principal speeches; announcing each student's name as their pre-loaded photo in orange cap and gown with their quote appear; and ending with the traditional turning of the tassel. These pre-recorded segments will be streamed live at 10 a.m. on June 5.

Woodside students will be able to access the video online later for their own at-home celebrations. School administrators are also committed to doing an in-person event when, or if, restrictions allow even if it's in the fall, Principal Diane Burbank said.

Alison Murchek, a senior at the alternative Middle College program who would have also attended graduation at her home school, Los Altos High School, said being a senior during the shutdown feels "surreal."

"Due to the fact that we might not have a graduation, it kind of makes me feel like I went through all of these years of school for nothing. This may seem dramatic, but in American culture your high school graduation is such a romanticized moment," she said.

Despite the disappointment and anxieties about what's ahead, seniors said they have mostly come to terms with what they have no control over — a global pandemic — and are focusing on staying positive.

Suh, the Gunn senior, still plans to decorate her graduation cap regardless of when she'll be able to toss it in the air, surrounded by her classmates.

"I think there's a new sense that we're persevering through this together," she said.

Embarcadero Media staff writers Angela Swartz and Kate Bradshaw contributed to this article.

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