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A bittersweet goodbye

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Thursday, June 5, 2003

Graduating seniors share their thoughts about reaching the end of the road

When all is said and done, Friday night, the class of 2003 will be the last class to "walk" at the old high school. In fact, by this time next year, the building in which they spent the four grueling, if not at times rhapsodic, years of transition from adolescence to adulthood, will be gone. A parking lot for the new "facility," currently sitting above it on the hill, mid - construction, will take the place of the building that stood there for 33 years.

The new building is high-tech. It is clean, modern and efficient. It has walls to block out noise from neighboring classrooms and computer rooms with DSL lines that will connect students to remote parts of the world in a matter of moments. It has a library with more resources than students will know what to do with, brand new state-of-the-art lab space and a cafeteria fit for kings. But the class of 2003 wouldn't trade their old building for the world. Well, most of them.

They are a class that has faced hardship, and come through it. They suffered the losses of fellow students to suicide and tragic accident. They lost a teacher to cancer. But they have persevered, and most of them think it has made them stronger. According to Principal Susan M. Nicholson, who guided the young acolytes through their high school years, the class of 2003 will be remembered as outstanding, in every way.

Each and every student of the class of 2003 is unique and each is experiencing the transition from high school to the wondrous beyond in a different way.

Benjamin Lu will graduate with top honors as valedictorian of the NAHS class of 2003. He plans to delve into the mysteries of cognitive science and artificial intelligence at the most prestigious technological school in the nation -- M.I.T.

Lu has been working all week on his valedictorian address, and Friday, he will try to put words to the feelings he and his classmates are sharing as they come together for the last time.

"I have found it very challenging to come up with exactly how I feel," said Lu. "I have mixed feelings, really. It's a big step."

Lu said he will miss the people he knew at North Andover High most of all. "We were all really lucky to have

such a fantastic faculty, and all my peers were just wonderful ... I will be leaving a lot of good friends here," he said.

Lu said he "enjoyed the dynamic (he) saw between teachers" in the open high school and thinks that is one thing students will miss out on in the new facility.

"People say it is defective, it's a warehouse, it's a dump, but it was fun ... Over four years I've really grown fond of it by now. I guess you could say I'm attached," he said.

Lu talked excitedly about his anticipation of student life at M.I.T. "There are just so many interesting things going on there ... It is thrilling to think I will be in a place at the edge of human development and around so many great minds," he said.

He said the most important thing he got from his four years at North Andover High, was "I learned how to learn, and I learned how to adapt."

He said some of his peers-to-be at M.I.T. will be a step ahead of him, having tested out of certain introductory classes and having had a better background in computers, but he is ready for the challenge of catching up.

"I don't regret at all having gone through a public education," he said. "I had a great four years."

Salutatorian, Nick Chory, is looking forward to entering the school of business at Boston College in the fall, but said he too is faced with mixed emotions as he winds out the days of his high school career.

"I think it is a bittersweet time for all of us because we know this is the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood, or at least the beginning of independence," he said. "I am looking forward to it, but I don't think any of us will fully understand it until we get there."

He said he has feelings of both anxiety and excitement about the experiences that await him, but he is ready. "I know in my gut it is time for me to move on," he said. "I think I will begin to find out who I am in college."

Chory said he is glad his class was able to stay and graduate in the old building, where they spent their four years.

"Not many people really want to go to the new building. I mean, it's a great facility ... but to go through the transition in the middle of your senior year, that would be tough."

"I will miss high school," he said. "Most likely this will be the last class to walk from this building. We had a close knit class, we went through a lot of tragedy, but we had really good people, and we made it through together."

Sarah Comerchero will head off to the University of Maryland in the fall. She said she feels a mixture of nerves and excitement, but mostly excitement.

"I am really anxious to meet new people and be in a new place, but I am also nervous because it will be a huge amount of people, all at once."

She said she will miss learning three subjects at one time in a no-walled classroom. She said she won't miss doing it in the freezing cold of a drafty building with sub-par heating.

Comerchero said she will be sad to come home and not see the school there anymore.

"It's sad that we won't be able to come back. Even though we complained, all our memories are in there."

Justin Marchegiani will go to University of Massachusetts, Amherst in the fall to study business.

"I'm not nervous at all," he boasted. "It's all about the freedom ... I can't wait to be on my own, get into the college experience and start meeting new people."

Marchegiani was one of the few who said he won't miss the old building, but he was proud that he would be a member of its final graduating class.

He said the curtain call for his high school years have made him somewhat sentimental. "When you come to the end, you start to appreciate it - the people you are with, your teachers, the whole school, really."

Brendan O'Neill said one thing he certainly won't miss is having to get up every weekday at 6:30 a.m. to get to school in time to do the morning announcements, but he'll miss most everything else. O'Neill will go to Syracuse in the fall, looking to get into the communications program.

"It's really hitting me now," said O'Neill on Wednesday, just back from York, Maine with the rest of his class from their senior trip. At graduation practice, earlier this week, O'Neill had to stop to remind himself, "this is for real, we're really leaving this place."

O'Neill said that while he is a little bit nervous about meeting his new roommate and settling in, "overall I'm stoked. I want to take advantage of everything the campus has to offer. I think college will really give me a chance to see where I stand, and to be out there without the safety net."

He said the toughest part about leaving is that his class will have no building to come back to for reunions.

"Even next spring, the building is not going to be here. We're not gonna have the chance to go back into the building where we spent our high school years and say, 'Hey look, remember where that happened,' or 'Remember when this happened here?' All our memories will be erased."

Rob McCarthy plans to join the Army National Guard in August. He said he is looking forward to his last summer as a free man. "I'm pretty excited," he said. After he joins the National Guard, he said there will be no more sleeping in.

McCarthy said he will miss socializing with friends, and talking, but he won't miss the school work.

"I'm just glad we got to spend the whole time wall-less," he said. "I wouldn't want to go to the new school. It's going to be so much different."

Reflecting on the tragedies that the class of 2003 had to endure, McCarthy said, "I think in some ways, some of the things we went through as a class forced us to grow up a little quicker. We dealt with some things other classes haven't had to deal with ... but in some ways, we're just like everybody else."

When D.J. Berube walks from the Old North Andover High School Friday night, he will consecrate a sort-of family legacy.

"It's kind of cool, because my uncle was a member of the first class to ever graduate from this building," he said, "and I am going to be a part of the last."

Berube, unlike some of his classmates, plans to get right to work this summer doing landscape design with his older brother. He plans to take a course in landscape architecture in the winter. "I'd rather be working than sitting in class," he said.

"I don't think it will really hit me until September comes around, and I get the feeling that I have to go back to school - but I don't," he said.

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