

News

Student speakers deliver messages of triumph during Paly graduation

Families and friends pack quad to celebrate the Class of 2019

by Cierra Bailey / Palo Alto Weekly

Uploaded: Thu, May 30, 2019, 11:30 pm
Time to read: about 3 minutes



[View this story with more photos.](#)

Palo Alto High School recognized its centennial graduating class Thursday evening, but the commencement ceremony was more than just a celebration of academic achievement.

The scene met the expectations of typical high school graduation ceremonies: proud parents snapping photos with their cellphones and cameras and students posing for selfies with their friends while showing off their elaborately decorated caps. The mood quickly became reflective as student speakers took to the podium to honor their diverse cultures and upbringings, acknowledge the guidance they've received throughout their lives from their parents and commemorate overcoming adversity.

Conquering obstacles was an underlying theme of the event. During his speech "Dream to Reality," student speaker Gerzain Gutierrez talked about his experience learning English in third grade, when he entered the Palo Alto Unified School District as a first-generation Mexican American student, and his struggles to fit in.

"So many people believed in me when I didn't. I've failed so many times and been through the toughest times, but here I am standing in front of all of you," Gutierrez proudly said.

Fellow speaker Alexander Daw shared details about being bullied throughout his youth for being African American and raised by a single mother as he delivered his speech "The Result," which followed a rhythmic, poetic flow similar to that of spoken word.

"I admit it; I wanted to be noticed, but my mom taught me how to work with no praise

and I admit it; I wanted a handout, but football taught me how to earn my place

and I admit it; I wanted to stand out, but Paly taught me how to save my place.

To be a person, not a label, not another blank slate.

To go out and be you, and not to save face," Daw said to applause and cheers from the crowd.

Graduates Maya Rollerson, Meletoeumu Kata and Laviena Pelesikoti also paid respects to their Polynesian heritage with a dance performance to "Ke Tulou" in between Gutierrez and Daws's speeches.

"I'm just grateful I made it this far," said Jesus Ayon, who is heading to the University of California, Irvine to study computer science in the fall. As an East Palo Alto resident, he said he is proud to have successfully navigated his way through Paly, where he was among the minority. "I just want to go as far as I can and do as much as I can for my community and my family," he said.

For many students, the occasion was bittersweet. "I am heartbroken but hopeful," said Associated Student Body President Vivian Feng who kicked off the student reflections portion of the event.

"I'm heartbroken that I might not get to see some of you again, but hopeful that at least we will live in each others' memories," she said.

Kaushik Seshardi said that he will miss his friends when he heads off to the University of California at Berkeley to pursue a chemical engineering degree. But graduating "marks a period of growth" for him, he said, as he spent his last days of high school reflecting upon his maturation from freshman year up until this point.

Parents in attendance shared similar conflicting emotions. Shireen Bazzi and Mohamad Mourad said they had "very mixed feelings" because they were proud of their daughter Yasmine Mourad and excited for her future, but will miss her when she goes away to college in Indiana.

"She's used to change," Mohamad Mourad said of his daughter, noting that they've lived in five countries throughout her life. "But every time she's faced change we were with her and this time we're not going to be there."

As Feng addressed her fellow graduates, she said she hopes their class will leave a legacy of "ambition and conviction."

"We should hold one another accountable to act on our dreams," she said. "It is up to us, collectively, to believe in the abilities, not just of others, but of ourselves. It is up to us to expect action, not just of others, but of ourselves."

Related content:

- View the full list of Palo Alto High's Class of 2019 [here](#).
- [The moments, songs and emojis that define the class of 2019: Seniors reflect on their high school careers](#)



Cierra started her journalism career after college as an editorial intern with the Pleasanton Weekly in 2014. After pursuing opportunities in digital and broadcast media and attending graduate school at Syracuse University, she's back as the editor of the Vine. [Read more >>](#)

Follow Palo Alto Online and the Palo Alto Weekly on Twitter [@paloaltoweekly](#), Facebook and on Instagram [@paloaltoonline](#) for breaking news, local events, photos, videos and more.

SLIDESHOW



Tess Manjarrez, Paloma Mitra and Evan Baldonado take a photo together with their unique graduation caps after commencement at Palo Alto High School on May 30, 2019. Photo by Magali Gauthier.

Help sustain the local news you depend on.

Your contribution matters. Become a member today.

[Join](#)



Meet the winners!

[View](#)

Most Viewed Stories

- [Julie Lythcott-Haims sets sights on Palo Alto City Council seat](#)
- [Realtor Alex Comsa jumps into Palo Alto council race](#)
- [Back-to-school season calls for donations to support students in need](#)
- [Brand new library in Menlo Park celebrates Chinese traditions and community](#)
- [Deep divisions, further delay for California's math guidelines](#)

Craving a new voice in Peninsula dining?

Sign up for the Peninsula Foodist newsletter.

[Sign up now](#)

Comments

Don't miss out on the discussion!
Sign up to be notified of new comments on this topic.

[Submit](#)

Post a comment

Sorry, but further commenting on this topic has been closed.

Index

- Home
- News
- TownSquare
- Blogs
- A&E
- Community Calendar
- Sports
- Home & Real Estate
- Visitor Info

- Send News Tips
- Subscribe
- Print Edition/Archives
- Express / Weekend Express
- Promotions
- Special Pubs
- Obituaries
- Circulation & Delivery

- About Us
- Contact Us
- Advertising Info
- Terms of Use
- Privacy Policy

- Mountain View Voice
- The Almanac
- TheSixFifty.com
- Redwood City Pulse
- Redwood City Pulse

© 2022 Palo Alto Online
All rights reserved.

Embarcadero Media

PR MediaRelease
Sponsored content
Mobile site