

North Hastings High School Class of 2023 celebrates graduation



By Bill Kilpatrick

On June 29 hundreds of people packed the North Hastings High School gymnasium to witness the commencement ceremonies for the 2023 graduating class. In total, 88 students walked across the stage to receive their diplomas and of those, 85 received their Ontario Secondary School Diploma and three Life Skills Program students received a Certificate of Accomplishment. The ceremony included the handing out of over 75 awards worth approximately \$10,000, including 27 subject awards from the varying departments along with 45 special awards and three awards for the Highest Scholastic standing and the Valedictorian Award.

The class of 2023 had a tumultuous high school experience that began normal enough in the fall of 2019, but little did they know what was in store for them over the next four years. By March of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to take hold, many of the students, according to the Valedictorian Cody Wannamaker, initially welcomed the extra week of March break that was given to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but the extra week soon turned into months and then ran into the summer. Over the summer the Government of Ontario wrestled with what the 2020-2021 school year would look like as the pandemic continued to spread.

Over the next two years all the students would experience much uncertainty and instability as the provincial government, local School Boards, and educators tried to meet the educational needs of students while preventing the spread of COVID-19. This resulted in ever changing priorities as the students went back and forth from in-person to on-line teaching as the number of COVID-19 infections increased or decreased. The students began school under the semester model, but soon found themselves doing octomesters and then quadesters, but by 2022 the pandemic had subsided enough that they could return to normal semesters for their last year at the high school.

Despite all the disruptions and uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic the students persevered and, in many cases, excelled. Of the 88 graduates, 45 were in the Honours Society, 26 earned the title of Ontario Scholar, and 10 students received their Specialist High Skills Major for the environment. Qwin Goodwin, was the big winner of the evening earning all three of the Highest Scholastic Standing awards including the Magister award, the Clarke Gaebel Memorial Award, and the Medal of the Governor General of Canada. Goodwin, who earlier in the year won the Schulich Leader Award Scholarship worth \$120,000, also managed to pick up another 10 awards during the evening bringing his total to 13.

Other winners of note included Jonah Aldom who took home five awards including the Magister Award for the top college-bound student with the highest average in the school. Jack Lloyd took home four awards including the Husky Science Award for ?combined excellence in senior sciences with outstanding achievements in arts or athletics.? Anika Quehl, Koda Carriere, C.J. Dillabough, and Carson Winmill all took home four awards each. All told, 39 students are pursuing post-secondary education, a few are taking a gap-year, and a number of students have shown interest in pursuing a trade.

?For the class of 2023, high school has been quite the adventure, not necessarily a fun one but, I like to think we made the best of it,? stated Wannamaker during his Valedictorian speech, adding that his four years of high school ?just flew by.? For Wannamaker, who is returning to North Hastings High School next year to pick up a couple extra credits, graduation for him is a ?bitter-sweet experience? since many of his fellow classmates will not be returning to high school. In the end Wannamaker stated that he ?wishes everyone the best of luck next year no matter what you are doing whether it be working, college, university, apprenticeships, or something else,? adding two pieces of advice for everyone: ?Figure out what you want to do and go get it,? and while you are pursuing your goals remember to ?Just be nice to anyone,? you meet along the way. ?You never know, that silly little gesture [of kindness] might be enough to make that person's day and help put a smile on their face,? said Wannamaker adding that, ?This is not goodbye, but rather ?I'll talk to ya later.?'