

UCHS Class of 2019...from Page 1A



The May 24 commencement featured the largest graduating class in Union County history. Photo by Mark Smith

who have enlisted in various branches of the U.S. Armed Forces.

The Class of 2019 had about three times the military inductees as the previous class, Sutton said.

Eli Reeves and Kanon Hemphill delivered a moving memorial for their classmate Jennifer Beavers, who passed away in 2014.

Hemphill pointed out an empty chair on which sat a folded purple cap and gown that was placed in Beavers' memory, after which Reeves and Schroeder played a short instrumental on piano and trumpet.

Principal C.T. Hussion introduced Salutatorian Adalyn Rogers, who plans to attend the University of Georgia and major in math before going on to medical school.

"Even with all the academic lessons I've been a part of over the years, I've found that the most important lessons I carry are not from any curriculum," said Rogers. "No matter what outside source I looked to throughout the past 13 years, I failed to truly find my worth."

Instead, Rogers said she found self-value by looking inward.

"You shouldn't find your value from how you compare to others," said Rogers. "Instead, focus on finding and pursuing your passion. Live your life without worrying about how others will perceive you. Find validation instead from within, with a little validation from others sprinkled in."

"As (classmate) Haley Allen has always reminded us, follow your heart - not others' hearts, but your own. It doesn't matter how you measure up to those around you as long as you're truly happy with the path that you are taking."

Rogers spoke on another important life lesson she learned while on two trips to Haiti with her youth group from House of Prayer Church during spring break of her freshman and junior years.

"These trips opened my eyes to see and my heart to feel things that I'd never seen and felt before," she said, adding that seeing and experiencing subject poverty made her realize how fortunate she has been.

"We have been privileged to have all the resources and opportunities that our school system and community has provided. But opportunities and resources do not matter if you don't take advantage of them," said Rogers, making sure to thank all who have helped her and her classmates over the



Two Class of 2019 graduates sharing a celebratory pose in Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium on May 24. Photo by Mark Smith

years. Hussion then introduced Valedictorian Carson Chambers, who plans to attend the University of Georgia and major in biology.

After a heartfelt thank you to her parents, family members, teachers, mentors and classmates, Chambers described her appreciation for being able to "see the big picture" and encouraged her classmates to do the same.

"We cannot stop after receiving our diplomas," said Chambers. "We have much work to do. Walking across this graduation platform is not the end goal, but simply a milestone."

"Every single individual sitting here today has more to do and many more exciting groundbreaking new ventures to undertake. The amount of potential sitting on this field right now is overwhelming. And the worst thing that can happen is for it to go untapped."

"So, I say to you all: do not let your potential go untapped. Put yourself to work. Tap into your talents and aspirations. Move forward and set your eyes on the big picture, whatever that may be."

"Congratulations, Class of 2019. I can say with true sincerity that it has been my pleasure to be a member of such a wonderful class. Thank you."

Hussion then delivered 205 diplomas, with accolades from the audience with each delivery.

"This is the most graduates in Union County history," said Hussion. "And among you are some of the brightest and most talented young men and women in our country, with a deep mixture of service, leadership, academic, athletic and artistic talents. You really are the perfect class, and I'll miss you dearly."

"UCHS has always

been a good school, but over the last four years, you've helped us become one of the shining stars of North Georgia. For several years in a row now, we've led the entire region in the state test scores, College and Career Readiness, graduation rate, percentage of HOPE-eligible graduates.

"During your time here, you've helped us become one of only four public STEM certified high schools in the state of Georgia. You've brought us state championships in multiple areas and have been the only class - let's say it one more time - in 14 years to win, not only one, two, but three Class of the Years."

"My hope is that you'll successfully stand out wherever your paths may lead, simply because you graduated from this high school."

Hussion cautioned the Class of 2019 to use the soft skills that employers say are lacking in today's youth.

"Be on time - being 15 minutes early is on time," said Hussion. "When someone greets you, greet them back. If your job has a dress code, follow it. Know when to put your phone away. Be engaging with people."

"As crazy as it sounds, this simple advice can set you apart from your peers more than a 4.0 GPA. Thank you to the Class of 2019, and congratulations."

And so, Emily Owenby led the turning of the tassels, and Superintendent John Hill said the magic words to the Class of 2019, officially making them high school graduates.

The ceremony concluded with a singing of the Alma Mater, a special closing by Sam Cockerham and Britt Waller, a viewing of the Senior Class Video, and a spectacular firework show.

Woody Gap...from Page 1A



Class of 2019 graduates enjoying themselves during graduation at Woody Gap School on May 25. Photo by Todd Forrest

After moving once again, and on brink of losing hope of ever finding God or her home, her perspective began to change.

"I realized that home was never a house," said Aponte. "Home is the people you form a bond with. Home is my relationship with God and with the ones I love and the ones that love me back. Home is where the heart is."

"To me, home will never again be just a place - home will be people. So, thank you to all of my teachers, friends and classmates who have made every year enjoyable no matter the situation."

"This place has been a real consistency in my life. I appreciate it and everyone here. This place has a sense of camaraderie that I feel big schools would lack. Every moment has been precious."

"I've enjoyed these 13 years with everyone I've met, some more than others, and I will miss it dearly. This may not be a house, but it does feel like a second home. Thank you for making it special."

Before Mott delivered his speech as salutatorian, Marine Corps Staff Sgt. Jesse David took center stage to make a few remarks regarding Woody Gap's newest member of the U.S. Armed Forces.

"I met Luke last fall, and since I've gotten to know him, one of the things that stood out is what an incredibly excellent human being he is; he's a great guy," said David. "He's selfless, he's dedicated, he's determined, and he's just an excellent person. We're very excited we got him for our Marine Corp family."

Mott opened his address by telling the standing room only crowd inside the Woody Gap School auditorium how

difficult it was to summarize his time at Woody Gap.

"There are memories that I made here that I would be unable to make anywhere else," he said, citing his eighth-grade year when Local Studies teacher Althea Cantrell taught him how to make his first homemade apple pie during the Indian Summer Festival.

Mott went on to thank his shop teacher, Gary Butler, for teaching him how to measure and cut wood properly, crediting Butler as the reason he was able to complete his first woodworking project.

Not only did Mott excel with his classwork, carpentry and baked goods, he shined athletically during his time as a Woody Gap Falcon, and he went on to thank each of his coaches for guiding him both on and off the court.

"All of my coaches have made an impact on my life, not just as an athlete, but as a person," said Mott. "Each and every one of them pushed and encouraged me to go beyond my limits and become better."

He also thanked several of his teachers, some dating back to eighth grade, for challenging him in the classroom, and he thanked his family for instilling in him the importance of good morals, values and hard work.

He thanked Coach Shook for teaching him the value of character. Staff Sgt. David was also acknowledged by Mott for passing down mental and physical perseverance while battling adversity.

Furthermore, Mott credited his friends and the community for standing by his side following the passing of his grandfather last November.

At the conclusion of Aponte and Mott's addresses, Principal Knight recognized the parents of each member of the

Class of 2019.

Up next, Union County Schools Superintendent John Hill presented the graduates with their diplomas, and afterward, he shared a few words of his own.

"It is an honor and a privilege to serve as your school superintendent, and it is a blessing to be here today to witness these young people take their first steps into adulthood," said Hill. "Congratulations. You are now Woody Gap Schools alumni. I want you to make this place proud."

Following the diploma presentation and the turning of tassels, the annual Senior Video produced by Butler was once again an emotional moment for everyone in attendance.

A photo montage spanning the lives of each senior put to the classic rock sounds of Lynyrd Skynyrd and Journey, as well as the contemporary hits of Train and Vitamin C, provided an 18-year walk down memory lane filled with laughs, smiles and the occasional tear.

At the conclusion of the video, the lights remained dim for another Woody Gap tradition, the Candlelight Service, which symbolically represents that passing of the torch to next year's senior class.

Each member of the Class of 2019 stood while holding a lit candle that each individual member of the Class of 2020 used to light their own candle.

The Candlelight Service would mark the end of the 2019 commencement exercises, as Principal Knight used her closing remarks to invite everyone to the cafeteria for the post-graduation reception hosted by the faculty in honor of the seniors.

MECHS Ceremony...from Page 1A

others say about them.

"I'm going to study language and linguistics and major in Spanish and possibly minor in Arabic," said Gray. "Honestly, I plan to use these however the Lord directs me, and right now, I believe He wants me in the mission field, but by three, five, 10 years down the road, I have no idea where I will be."

"Our whole lives, it has been rammed down our throats to have a plan. But life is what's happening while we are making other plans, so it's okay to make a couple thousand mistakes before we figure out what we love and what we want to do."

Added Gray, "People keep knocking our generation for being lazy and entitled, and I don't know if you have heard that, but I want to defend us, because we are such an innovative and smart generation, and we have so much to offer."

The guest speaker for the event was Tony Lowden, who is the former manager of the Faith and Justice Initiative within the Reentry Services Unit of the Department of Community Supervision.

"My topic today is that I don't want you to lose your signal," said Lowden. "These cellphones, and especially my cellphone, if the signal was lost, I would feel like I have lost everything."

"My calendar, texting my wife and my wife checking on me, paying my bills on the phone, navigation and getting back and forth around the state - if I lost the signal on my cellphone, I would feel like I'm lost."

Added Lowden, "Every now and then, you have people that tell you that you are not going to make it, and you have a choice on whether or not you give up on yourself, give up on



MECHS Union Site Administrators Roy Perren and Teena Atkins at the May 25 MECHS graduation. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

life, give up on the things that you want to do in life. And I want to tell you, as a man of God, that if you lose your signal on the inside, when you stop thinking that you can make it, you walk into a nightmare."

The Union Site had a total of 16 graduates: Chance Botts, Kimberly Bowen, Jessi

Bracken, Calli Burgwardt, Bradley Fairless, Alondra Gonzalez, Haley Goodwin, Victoria Hilbish, Skylar Huggins, Michael Johnston, Taylor Jones, Audrey Justice, Steven Meador, Cameron Moore, Christian Salinas and Victoria Singleton.

Lake clean up volunteers needed

"Friends of the Nottely and Toccoa" are looking for volunteer kayakers and canoeists for a lake clean up at Meeks Park II Canoe Launch June 15 from 9-11 a.m.

Trash bags will be provided. Please bring a hat, sunscreen, bottle of water, close toed shoes, life jacket and a trash picker if you have one. Don't forget your kayak or

canoe. River's Alive will be sponsoring this event and have donated t-shirts to the first 28 volunteers.

For more information please contact Amber Jensen at 770-403-5975 or join "Friends of the Nottely and Toccoa" Facebook page.

Thank you for volunteering to help keep Union County beautiful. (NMay29,22)CA