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Students return to Lafayette Elementary for High School Graduate Walkthrough

By Elaine Borden Chandler



High school graduates walk the familiar hallways of Lafayette Elementary during the inaugural High School Graduate Walkthrough, Tuesday, May 21. Photo Elaine Borden Chandler

The playground of Lafayette Elementary is normally empty at 2 p.m. on a Tuesday, with children still in classrooms and parents not yet allowed on campus. However, on May 21, a small crowd started to form. It was a group of high school seniors, some dressed in blue or green or white graduation robes, some in t-shirts and shorts, many in mortarboard caps decorated in sequins or paint. New arrivals congregated around a table with a huge pile of name tags where the crowd became so thick that at one point a student walked over to her friends and said, "I'm just going to be nameless." The most commonly heard phrase was, "Oh my god, I haven't seen you since middle school!" Students bunched together, squinting in the relentless sunlight to see who else was there and wandering from group to group. They were waiting to begin the inaugural High School Graduate Walkthrough at Lafayette Elementary.

The Graduate Walkthrough was an event where graduating seniors who had attended Lafayette Elementary as children came back and walked through the halls - a return to their academic roots at home before going out into the world. As the students waited for the starting signal, Mia DeLuca, a Campolindo graduate wearing camo high-top sneakers, was eager to see her three remaining teachers to let them know how much she improved academically. "I'm going to be graduating with honors this year," she said and then laughingly confessed, "But I forgot my tassel!"

At 2:15 p.m., a crackling voice over the speaker announced, "Please join us in celebrating our graduates!" and four students led the procession as "Pomp and Circumstance" blared over the speakers. The high schoolers wound through hallways lined with elementary students cheering and holding up their hands to receive high fives.

Joseph "JJ" Sanchez, graduating from Acalanes, was struck by how many good memories the walk brought back. "It's just really strong emotions," he said, smiling. "Some of my old teachers have already retired so I'm missing them, but it's really great to see all the teachers still here and all the classmates that went to the other schools."

Many of the teachers stood along the hallways with their current students or gathered in the courtyard where the walkthrough ended. In front of the auditorium doors, Betsy Balman stood in a straw hat and received hug after hug. Balman, who was a teacher at Lafayette Elementary and is currently the Stanley Middle School principal, said, "This was the class that we had to promote online because of COVID so it's just all the more special to see how they have transformed."

Students watched a video from their former custodian Mr. Dave, snatched up pouches of lemonade referencing Teacher's Lemonade Day, and went to find their friends and former teachers. Mr. Moe, a fifth-grade teacher, chatted with visitors in waves. "This is a class that I remembered very fondly," he said, "It was great to see them and hear about where they're going to college."

The parents of the graduating students also gathered in the courtyard, hugging their children, taking their photos, and cheerfully commiserating with each other. One man, dabbing his eyes, grinned and asked his friend, "Did you cry?" who chuckled as she responded, "Oh yeah." Eliza Veronda admitted she wasn't sure how to describe her emotions but then succinctly said, "It's bittersweet but we're so happy for them." Her friend Eileen Nath added, "I think it says a lot that this was totally voluntary and so many students came back." Many of the parents emphasized not only their pride for their children and other students they had seen grow up. It wasn't unusual to see a parent talking to a student that they had last seen in grade school, asking them what was now happening in their life.

There was one parent in particular whom everyone was thanking and praising. Kelly Daggs, president of the Acalanes Parent Club and mother of graduating student Taylor, independently initiated and organized the walkthrough in just three weeks. During the whole event, she could be seen in her sea green dress,

directing the action, congratulating parents and students, and checking arrangements. She believes events like these are vital to keeping the community alive and connected, especially in difficult times. "There's some things that came out of COVID that are to be celebrated and some things that the kids have really suffered from. We decided to say, Let's have a positive moment - you didn't get your graduation diploma in eighth grade. That's okay, we have today." Dags is passing the baton of leading the walkthrough to Raina Foster next year. The walkthrough is planned for two more years and expected to continue after that with parents, teachers, and administration all expressing enthusiasm for it to become a tradition.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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