CLASSROOM CHRONICLES

CELEBRATING SENIORS

How a High School Leader is Creatively Honoring the Class of 2020

DEPARTMENT of EDUCATION
Louisiana Believes

School facilities are closed for the duration of the school year and large, in-person gatherings remain off limits as Louisiana attempts to curb the spread of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), forcing high schools to find creative ways to celebrate the accomplishments of the Class of 2020. This month's blog spotlights Emily Martin, director of middle and high school at MSA West Academy in Iberville Parish, who has gained recognition for organizing memorable alternatives to the traditional milestones, like prom and graduation, that senior year has to offer.

When school facilities were closed, administrators at MSA West Academy wanted to remain connected to their staff, their students, and their community. This included finding creative ways to celebrate and send-off the Class of 2020.

> **"WE DON'T ALLOW STUDENTS TO MAKE EXCUSES OR ACCEPT DEFEAT, SO WE KNEW WE COULDN'T LET THEM SEE US GIVE UP EITHER."**

"We have an amazing leadership team of admins and teachers who are dedicated, versatile, creative, and willing to put in countless hours to move mountains for kids. It's definitely a 'where there's a will, there's a way' situation," Martin said.

They did, indeed, find a way.

Through weekly Facebook posts, they began announcing a lineup of creative events to celebrate the Class of 2020. First was a virtual prom hosted entirely through the school's Instagram account. Then came a tunnel of cheering teachers holding signs to honor each senior student as they received, via curbside pickup at the school, their announcements and accessories.

And most recently, the MSA West team enlisted the help of School Resource Officer Troy Doiron, who also works as a DJ and owns a portable stage, to host a "**Senior Honor Parade**," a multi-day event in which they toted the stage across the parish to various locations to provide each of the 73 graduates a personalized awards ceremony.

In most cases, the portable stage was brought to the home of a graduating senior. The family was notified in advance that school administrators would stop by to honor the student, but they were not told a fully decorated commencement stage would be in tow.

"The seniors were shocked when we rolled out the stairs and announced for them to take the stage. It was so, so fun," Martin said, noting families cried and smiled. "It was humbling to be able to give them a gift they thought was indefinitely lost in the mail, so to speak."

In other cases, the stage was brought to a convenient location. One evening, for example, the stage was set up in the parking lot of a community center to facilitate the families who lived farthest from school.

"When we pulled into that parking lot after dark to see all of the perfectly spaced cars backed in, decorated, and cheering for their students, it was awesome," said Martin.

The students were appreciative.

"It didn't matter if they received 10 awards or no awards: they were honored and recognized and celebrated in front of the people that matter most to them," said Martin. "When all this passes and we go back to whatever becomes the new normal, I hope we don't lose sight of that."

The planning, Martin admitted, was meticulous. But when asked why they did it, she said, "Because We're West." Their school culture, she explained, encourages students to rise to any occasion, maintain high expectations, and persevere through every challenge.

"I think of it as the best we can do with what we've got … and we're fortunate to have a lot," Martin said. "You really can't underestimate the impact that motivated, creative, and downright stubborn educators can have when they are all pulling in the same direction, keeping kids first no matter what."

Martin shared advice for other school leaders who are trying to come up with creative ways to celebrate seniors.

> **Just try it.**
> **Don't be afraid to get it 'wrong.'**
> **If your team has an idea, go for it. Map it out, get someone to poke holes in your plans, and then adjust. Focus on the good that you can do, not the negatives others might say. If you can keep your eyes and energy on the long-range plans and visions you have for your campus or school community instead of the challenges right in front of you, everything becomes a bit clearer.**

View highlights from MSA West Academy's Senior Honor Parade.

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