

## **AUSD Seniors Graduate "Virtually" with Support of Community Partnerships**



More than 700 Alameda Unified graduates walked the stage at Alameda Theatre this week as part of a massive project designed to honor their accomplishments via "virtual" commencements.

The students walked across the stage alone (to maintain social distancing) and the theater was empty (save for a handful of production crew and school and district staff). But the anticipation and excitement of the students, as well as the pride and commitment of staff, were as evident as at the traditional commencement ceremonies AUSD has been holding for more than a century.

### **Community Partnership**

The graduations were made possible by a partnership comprised of AUSD (led by Chief Student Support Officer Kirsten Zazo), Group Delphi (a design and production company based on Alameda Point), and Alameda Theatre & Cineplex (which allowed AUSD and Group Delphi to take over the theater for four days this week).

The team carefully considered the need to balance re-creating the commencement ritual with the current public health mandates about social distancing. The resulting plan consisted of having graduates from each school: line up six feet apart; have their portraits taken; line up (again six feet apart) to enter the theater; walk across the stage; pick up a symbolic diploma; give a 15-second speech; move their cap tassels from right to left; and then walk off the stage. A school staff person sat off to the side and announced the names of students, just as would happen in a traditional ceremony, and students wore masks except when on camera.



Patrick Kenney (a local photographer) and his wife Diana Kenney (who teaches in the Encinal Junior Jets program) took the pictures; each family will be given a copy of their student's portrait and a chance to order extras.



"I am deeply appreciative of the support of these three local businesses, the quickness with which our staff put the plan together, and the safe way it was executed. I am deeply appreciative of the hard work put in by the crew and district and school site staff, all of whom pretty much dropped everything to find a way to create a commencement experience that honors the hard work of our seniors as well as the challenging times in which we are living. These may not have been traditional ceremonies, but they are ceremonies we will all remember."

## **Broadcast Schedule**

The commencements themselves took a full four days to film. Kyle Conner, the owner of Alameda Theatre & Cineplex, allowed students and staff to use the lobby, stairways, upper gallery, historic theater space, and long hallways to move students through the various stations while maintaining the mandated social distance.

“We provided the use of this amazing historic theatre space because it is important to honor these graduates for their 12-year mission to adulthood and preparation for college or whatever comes next in each of their life’s stories,” Conner says. “Every graduate deserves a memorable graduation experience. From first concept discussion to first graduate was only about a week in preparation. We at the Alameda Theatre & Cineplex and Cinema Grill are enormously proud of our part in this event, and we stand ready to support this incredible island community in any way we can.”

Group Delphi curated the event and filmed on site to create cohesive virtual ceremonies that will be sent to families and also broadcast on local channel 29. The schedule for the public broadcasts will be:

- Island High School: June 10 (7 pm)
- ASTI: June 11 (7 pm)
- Encinal High School: June 12 (7 pm)
- Alameda High School: June 13 (7 pm)

“As a longtime member of the Alameda business community and supporter of youth programs in the region, Group Delphi is honored to produce and film the 2020 AUSD graduations,” says the company’s CEO and founder, Justin Hersh. “We are creating virtual graduation content so that loved ones, unable to attend the ceremony, can also celebrate this important milestone. This year’s celebrations are all quite different than we imagined they would be, but our pride in these students’ accomplishments remains steadfast. We can’t wait to see what their bright futures have in store.”

## **“This is It”**

Nailah Piggot, the senior class president from Alameda High School, admits she was – and still is – disappointed about being unable to have a traditional graduation. And initially, she says, “I was very skeptical of how everything would pan out. I was especially worried about backlash from students and families as well as not getting the full emotional value one might have at a traditional graduation ceremony.” But once she arrived at the theater, she says, she was impressed with how smoothly everything went and by how “all the adults were so kind and encouraging and they really tried to make us feel comfortable. It did make me quite emotional because I saw a lot of teachers and friends that I wish I could have given a hug and thanked for helping me get through the past four years. I definitely left the theater in tears.”

Two moments stood out for Nailah during the graduation. The first was when she burst into tears upon seeing AHS College and Career Specialist Gwen Meyer. “In that moment I think everything became very real and I realized ‘This is it,’ Nailah says, and oh my what a bittersweet ending it all was.” The second was the fact that she and her friends had only one tassel between them and so

quickly created a "Sisterhood of the Traveling Tassel." "After each person walked the stage, we disinfected the tassel and then passed it on to the next friend," she says. "This memory will be the one that sticks with me the most as I think it is a real snapshot of how resourceful and adaptable we have all had to learn to be in the face of being high school seniors during quarantine."

Nailah will be attending Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, in the fall.

Max Onaga, the senior class president for Encinal Jr. & Sr. High School says he also felt skeptical about the idea of a virtual graduation. "As class president, it's my responsibility to ensure that my class gets what it deserves and I felt a virtual graduation was a little underwhelming," he says. "However, working with the school district's team proved that they really had our best interest in mind and by the end I felt that a virtual graduation was the most proper form of ending off this year."

Once he got to the theater, he says, he was mostly focused on the speech he needed to give. But he also enjoyed seeing classmates. "Of course it wasn't ideal," he says, "but given the stagnancy of these past weeks, it was like a breath of fresh air seeing my fellow graduates."

When asked what he will most remember from the graduations, Max named his fellow salutatorians' speeches. "Although I'll get to rewatch them once the graduation video is released," he says, "hearing their speeches in person really hit me in the heart as it was another sign that high school is truly over."

Max has been accepted at the US Military Academy at West Point.