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## Becoming Adults

### West Potomac Class of 2006 receives advice, diplomas

By John Teschner/Gazette

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"Adults," said Brad Dalton, the Student Government Association president, "we are adults." Gravity and triumph were mingled in his voice. Dalton was welcoming the thousands of family, friends, students and faculty who had flowed into George Mason's Patriot Center for West Potomac High School's 2006 Commencement ceremony. But for the 409th member of the graduating class, Dalton's announcement wasn't news. Retiring government and history teacher Bill Rhatican was given the Student Faculty Award, decided by a vote among the students. "I am most proud to be a member of the class of 2006," Rhatican said. He added that like the rest of his class, he too would be going to beach week.

But there are different degrees of adulthood. Rhatican is going to the beach with his wife. "We won't be seeing any of you guys where we are," he said.

Valedictorian Shannon Munyan admitted to the crowd that she had done a little growing up since the first time she'd attended graduation, when she was a freshman in the band. She had smuggled in a beach ball, inflated it, and started it bopping through the horn section. Her band teacher caught the ball, but not the culprit. Now, as graduating adults, Munyan pointed out, she and her classmates would be "tossing something much cooler: our caps. And no one will snatch them away from us never to give them back, hopefully."

Munyan compared her classmates' future to "a door at Pentagon Mall." No matter which door you walk through, there are always two more to choose from.

BUT SALUTATORIAN Diana Burk resisted metaphors for the future. "The diversity in this class makes that impossible," she said. "No single strand of words could tie us together and point us to the road ahead." said the pomp of the commencement ceremony and the unity of the caps and gowns she saw before her did not "reflect the turbulent years we spent together." With "the real world" of them, West Potomac's 2006 graduates would surely encounter situations for which nothing their previous experience had prepared them. "Craft your own metaphor," Burk urged her classmates.

Thao Do, the co-Salutatorian, crafted a metaphor from her own experience. "I love to paint, then described how she furrows her brow as she stands before the canvas, trying to be thoughtful as she waits for subconscious memories to inspire her. Her voice rose as she described the moment when inspiration would "glide" into her mind and through her fingers. Her joy in seeing paint on her canvas "without inhibition" was obvious. "Splash on your own imagination," she said. "Fashion your own image of the future."

Bruce Jankowitz presented the Faculty Award, which goes to a student, to Asia Mernissi. He described her as a "linguist, musician, athlete [and] award-winning debater" and cited her



Photos by Pam Brooks/Gazette  
To pass time before their graduation ceremony, Anth Fabrizio and Kaelin Emery engage in a tassel fight.



Guest speaker and alumnae Missy Cohen who is sound music editor talks about serendipity and its impact on their lives.

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internship on Capitol Hill with Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.), her work in Habitat for Humanity and her presidency of the Young Democrats.

MISSY COHEN delivered the commencement address. Cohen was a member of West Potomac's graduating class in 1986. She described the seemingly inconsequential decisions she had made over the last "20 years and six days" that had brought her to her current position, as a Golden Globe Award-winning sound and music editor for films.

Cohen shared the four words that "literally changed my life," spoken by a registrar when she was in her first days of college at Hofstra University on Long Island: "That class is closed." Cohen was trying to sign up for Television 101, the class she had known for years would be her first step towards becoming a famous director of television shows. Her hopes temporarily dashed, Cohen signed up for "Intro to Film" because the registrar pointed out it was still open. The class quickly transformed Cohen's ambitions. She knew she wanted to make movies.

Cohen used this story to illustrate "The absolute biggest force in my life - serendipity." She urged West Potomac's graduates to let serendipity into their lives. "One thing can lead to another, so let it," Cohen explained. "Talk to people you wouldn't talk to ordinarily. Ask the questions you're dying to ask."

She also quoted the advice of Mel Brooks, with whom she had worked, on biting off all of life. "If you're going to walk up to the bell," Brooks would say, "don't tap the bell. Ring the bell."

AFTER SO many speakers talked about the future, Principal Rima Vesilind recalled the students' high school years, moments before they began to file onstage for their diplomas. She remembered that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, occurred when the students were "just at the end of their childhood," and about to enter West Potomac. The students' entry into high school marked "not only an end of innocence for you, but an end of innocence ... in our own country." She pointed out that the class's high school career had been paralleled by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. She appealed to the class of 2006 to learn from the geopolitical situation. "In terms of community," Vesilind said, "in terms of mutual support, respect and tolerance ... I'm going to offer you my heartfelt kudos for the last time. I'm just going to miss you terribly."

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