

***In our continuing series highlighting the members of the Class of 2022, this is the final installment focusing on the graduates from Rosenwald High School, New Horizons and Margaret K. Lewis Exceptional School.***

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All of our graduates are special and watching them walk the stage is always such an honor and a privilege for me. Watching students from our special education centers graduate, however, is probably one of the most amazing experiences I have as Superintendent because so many of them have overcome so much just to get to graduation.

In our final graduation series article, we're honoring some of those very special graduates as we close our celebrations for the Class of 2022.

This year, the Class of 2022 from Rosenwald High School includes five graduates from the new Rosenwald Academy, three graduates from the school's teen parenting program and three scholarship recipients from Haney Technical College.

Rosenwald is our "second chance" high school for students who have experienced challenges in the typical high school setting. Many of these students have had every reason to give up or quit and yet they haven't ... they are determined to walk the stage and we're just as determined to do all we can to help them.

With smaller classes, a more flexible curriculum and a focus on real-world skills, Rosenwald opens up a plethora of possibilities for its graduates and the students are always incredibly grateful.

Markeis Gaither, a member of this year's graduating class from Rosenwald, said the staff helped him overcome many barriers and obstacles to ensure he walked the stage. "They have also provided me with positive encouragement during tough times," he said. "They have provided me with resources that have allowed me to be able to focus on my education instead of having to struggle with the everyday life stresses."

Markeis said his toughest challenge was finally accepting the importance of school. "I had to mature and realize without a high school diploma I could not achieve my life goals," he explained. Markeis wants to attend Haney to learn "some type of trade" after graduation.

Gabe Osborne, a member of the Class of 2022 from New Horizons which is another one of our alternative schools, also has big plans for life after graduation. "I want to attend Gulf Coast State College and start my journey to becoming an English teacher," he said. "And I want to return to teach at New Horizons one day." I cannot tell you how grateful I am to hear that Gabe wants to come back to teach English ... we are in desperate need of teachers and I can't think of a better way for one of our graduates to give back to his/her school than to return as a teacher.

Gabe, who "really can't put into words all the support I've received" from school staff, said he wouldn't be graduating without the caring adults at New Horizons. "I really wasn't myself at the

start of the school and I let my grades slip,” Gabe said. “But the teachers here really helped me overcome these problems and were always there for me.”

Gabe’s story is pretty typical for New Horizons students according to Gordy Pongratz, the school’s principal. “I am so impressed by this class and their determination,” he said. “This is the first class that I’ve seen all the way through from ninth through twelfth grade and they have seen so much but they continue to persevere.”

New Horizons is a 6-12 school for students who need additional academic, behavioral and emotional support. Gabe, Pongratz said, is the first graduate during his tenure who has been accepted at GCSC. “This class is also the first class to be part of a Student Government Association at New Horizons and three members of this class served in leadership roles,” Pongratz explained. “They have really been involved with the inner workings of the school but supporting journalism, yearbook, ITV and our mentoring program.”

Student involvement is also a huge part of the curriculum at Margaret K. Lewis Exceptional School in Millville. This school, which caters to students in pre-k through adulthood who have special needs, teaches independence as a primary lesson according to Principal Lori Hast. “Our students are learning to use a communication device to advocate and deepen friendships through conversations,” she said, “and they are developing social skills that will help them get and keep jobs.”

Graduates from MKL are excited about everything from “learning to read” to “using my Chromebook” to “dancing with friends,” according to Hast.

Members of the Class of 2022 wanted to thank their teachers for “giving me the encouragement to believe that I can do anything I set my mind to” and “learning to write my name.”

MKL students, Hast said, are learning to become leaders in society in every way possible.

Teaching our graduates to be good citizens is something we take seriously at Bay District Schools and it’s so exciting to hear that our students understand the importance of giving back to their community. Congratulations once more to the Class of 2022 ... Bay County is proud of you and we’re excited to see what this next chapter of life holds for all of you.