

H-F graduates given call to action for society's challenges

BY ERIC CRUMP

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The Homewood-Flossmoor High School class of 2022 was showered with congratulations and several episodes of thunderous applause during the graduation ceremony on Sunday, May 29.

They also received some straight talk from student government leaders and from District 233 Board of Education President Gerald Pauling.

Pauling applauded the seniors for overcoming an obstacle no other class has had to face: a global pandemic.

"You didn't let anything stop you — not COVID, not Delta, not Omicron," he said, referring to variants of the virus that fueled successive waves of infections. "You made it to this point today, and it's a testament to your strength, your resilience and your will to win."

Then Pauling issued a call to action, citing the many challenges facing the community and the nation, from increasing gun violence, the easy availability of illicit drugs, economic disparity and increasing political, racial and religious divisions.

He reminded the students that they will share in the responsibility of seeking solutions to those problems.



Eric Crump/H-F Chronicle

Homewood-Flossmoor High School seniors march across the Viking Stadium field on Sunday, May 29, at the start of graduation ceremonies.

"We can't truly solve these problems without you," he said. "You are our strongest weapon. You are intelligent. You are creative. You are enthusiastic. Working together we can secure our future."

Student leaders addressed their classmates. Ayomide Ajayi, president of the Student Government Executive Board, noted the major challenges the class of 2022 had faced in each year of its H-F journey.

He referred to a racist incident in their freshman year. Several white H-F students were seen on social media wearing blackface and harassing a Black worker at a fast

food establishment. That led to a student protest.

"This event shouldn't be taken with a grain of salt but as a lesson. We should use these experiences as a point of development as we continue to deal with prejudice and injustice throughout the world," he said.

Their sophomore year was cut short when the state shut schools as COVID-19 cases surged in March 2020. Their junior year was spent in remote learning rather than traditional classrooms.

"This moment we've experienced may someday be written in textbooks and taught

to our great grandchildren just as we read in our history books about the (14th century) black plague or the Great Migration," he said.

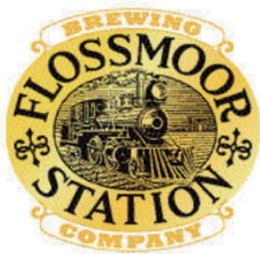
Their senior year saw more protests as students brought attention to allegations of sexual abuse among the student body and called for more action by the administration.

Class President Alexandria Edison addressed graduates by using the sturdy 300-foot tall redwood trees of northern California for an analogy.

"It's pretty amazing that one seed can grow to be so tall. For that to happen, the seed must be in the right climate and have the right soil," she said. "Graduates, for a moment I would like you to picture yourself as a seed. What's your climate like? Who are your friends? Are these people helping you or hurting you? If they aren't growing, then you won't grow."

Pauling also asked the audience to recognize retiring Superintendent Von Mansfield for his 21 years of service to the district.

"By our count you have graduated nearly 15,000 students," Pauling said. "Your consistent, determined, tenacious advocacy for our students and our children has mattered, it has made a difference and it truly is appreciated."



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