



THE GRADUATING SENIORS and guests were well spaced on Markowski Field giving lots of social distance during Saturday's Otter Valley Union High School commencement ceremony. Seventy-six young adults received diplomas.

Independent photos/William Haig

OV class of '21 graduates

By KATHERINE LAZARUS

BRANDON — On a sunny, beautiful day that saw 76 Otter Valley Union High School seniors graduate on a well-spaced Markowski Field, in observance of loosened pandemic guidelines, Principal Jim Avery said afterward that the event was a "brand new way to hold a graduation, so this class gets to set the standard."

Adorning the stage were vibrant bouquets donated by the Brandon

Florist Shoppe, while blue and white balloons highlighted the canopy that was set up on the field this past Saturday, June 12.

Of the seniors who earned their diplomas, through a pandemic-filled school year, Avery said theirs was a graduation "truly deserved."

Mirroring the sentiment of many in the crowd of hundreds, spread out in the chairs on the field and in the stadium, Valedictorian Mia Politano opened her speech to students, family and friends with the exclamation:

"Wow, is it nice to have the opportunity to greet so many people!"

Politano then addressed the circumstance that marked the entire year.

"Little did I know that it would take a global pandemic for me to fully understand and appreciate the meaning of Otter Valley's motto, 'Better together,'" she said.

Following a year and more of COVID restrictions, the graduates smiled with excitement in their blue and white gowns that each boasted a red carnation.

Although "clearly this class was impacted the greatest by the pandemic and certainly the longest," Avery said, everyone — family, faculty, community members — showed resilience by



DIPLOMA IN HAND, an Otter Valley graduate accepts a congratulatory hug on Saturday.

coming together to participate in the ceremony.

"I say, we learn to redefine life's imperfections — learn to see the beauty and value of life's trials and setbacks. Let's honor our experiences and honor our



IN THEIR FINAL act as Otter Valley students, the soon-to-be graduates excitedly wait their turn to be called for their diplomas.

challenges," Salutatorian Grace Coolidge said.

Rows of lawn chairs were set out, with extra space on the bleachers to host as many people as possible, a welcome change from restrictions of the past year.

After the commencement exercises, graduates hugged and everyone took photos around the school property.

"It was a beautiful ceremony — congratulations and I'm proud of them all," said Tyler Delancey, friend of graduate Rune Speyers.

Having conquered not only school but also COVID-19, the Otter Valley Class of 2021 surely earned a celebration for facing the

unexpected.

"Like I learned in biology, the diversity of life is what makes the

world so beautiful, so take pride in those differences," Politano told her classmates.



SALUTATORIAN GRACE COOLIDGE urges her classmates to honor their experiences and challenges.



If you're not sleeping