

# Otter Valley grads told to walk into the future with 'intent and purpose'

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BRANDON — The sun shined down on a packed, but physically distanced Markowski Field Saturday morning as Otter Valley Union High School bid farewell to the Class of 2021.

The school's 76 seniors processioned onto the field to "Pomp and Circumstance" as family and friends looked on.

Senior Brian Thornton welcome graduates and guests, stating, "I want to take this chance to thank everyone at the school for helping us to get to this point."

Salutatorian Grace Coolidge urged her fellow graduates to look back on their experiences, both good and bad, and redefine the imperfections they discover.

"Learn to see the beauty and value of life's trials and setbacks. Let's honor our experiences and honor our challenges. These tribulations give our lives deeper meaning, more dimension, more beauty," she said.

Coolidge explained that the idea of embracing one's flaws is reminiscent of the Japanese art of kintsugi, or "golden joinery," in which broken pottery is repaired using gold, silver or platinum.

"This method does not bring artifacts back to their exact original. Rather, it transforms them into something new, resulting in something more rare and more uniquely beautiful," she said.

Coolidge said the art form holds important lessons for graduates, such as teaching them that life can get messy, not to hide their "broken pieces," and to redefine their hardships as opportunities for growth.

"(Kintsugi) means approaching new situations with a curiosity and willingness to learn. It means a shift in thinking from, what did we lose, to what did we gain? This art goes beyond simply pointing out what is pleasing to the eye. It has to do with the symbolism behind the golden beauty of healing and resilience," she said.

Coolidge said the Class of 2021 is "nothing if not resilient," pointing to the many societal challenges they have faced over the past four years, including political polarization, the coronavirus pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, homophobia and transphobia, and mass shootings in schools.

“As we leave here today and get ready to take on whatever comes next, let’s embrace who we are and know that mistakes will happen. Failure will happen. Loss will occur. New cracks will be made. That’s life. But we now know that with resourcefulness and resilience, we will emerge from those events stronger and more uniquely beautiful. Own your scars and brush them with gold,” she said.

Valedictorian Mia Politano noted in her speech that after she and her fellow graduates walk across the stage, they will each embark on their own unique journey that won’t resemble anyone else’s.

“Like I learned in biology, the diversity of life is what makes the world so beautiful. So take pride in those differences rather than attempting to conceal them,” she said. “As we step forward into our futures, I urge everyone to walk with grace, courage, confidence and, most importantly, walk with intent and purpose.”

She acknowledged that it’s OK if not everyone has a clear destination before them just yet, and urged those people to explore and experience new things as they find what it is they are passionate about.

Politano encouraged everyone to take comfort in the fact that time is constant and quoted Abraham Lincoln, stating, “The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time.”

“While rushing to your next destination can be enticing, don’t speed, slow down and take that time to appreciate the now,” she said.

Madeleine O’Connell concluded the ceremony by congratulating her fellow graduates, telling them, “Let’s not cry because it’s over, let’s smile because it happened. Go out and be amazing, guys. Let’s make our school proud.”