

DALLAS

Continued from Page 1

High School's soon-to-be graduates could feel it as they began filling the Mountaineer Stadium just before 6 o'clock. The 44th commencement at Dallas High School was about to begin, as the Dallas High School band launched into the opening bars of "Pomp and Circumstance" and the seniors filed in.

One of the main themes of the evening, change, was established in welcoming remarks made by the senior class Treasurer, Megan Savage. She cited world-altering events that had come to pass since the class of 2005 started high school, such as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the tragic deaths of both Pope John Paul II and Ronald Reagan, the courtroom dramas of Martha Stewart and Enron, as well as a very personal and poignant loss for Dallas students — the December death of one of their own seniors, Winston Taylor. She went on to remark that if not for the generous, unconditional devotion of the teachers and family to the students, they would not have been able to make it through these seemingly bleak times, and that tonight was not just about the graduates, but about everyone who helped them in coming this far.

Newly-appointed Dallas School District Superintendent Frank Galicki was next on the podium. In his welcoming speech, he addressed another theme that would reappear as the night went on — the importance of self-esteem. Citing popular culture icon Gandalf from "The Lord of the Rings" series, Galicki told the graduates, "You never need to bow to no one." He also made a special point to thank the teachers that would be retiring from service this year, stating that "great teachers are not known for doing great things, but for making the students want to do great things." This sentiment was obviously not lost on the retirees, as many found their eyes a little misty at numerous points in the evening.

A moving choral interlude in which the Dallas High School chorus sang "Your Song" followed, and led into a speech by Sarah Vodzak, the Vice President of the senior class. She acknowledged the changes that had occurred in her classmates' lives thus far, as well as the very drastic one that was about to take place — the change from childhood/adolescence to young adulthood, and the courage that would be vital for all of the graduates as they made the transition. She sagely advised her class via a quote from Maria Shriver, saying, "The things you value most are things you struggle for."

Another citation of popular culture occurred in the next speech, given by Coral Stredny, in which she quoted the famed Broadway play "Wicked" to her class, imparting the line, "Maybe we won't meet again...but wherever our stories end, you have rewritten mine." The bittersweet acknowledgement of the separate paths the graduates were about to take rang true, as did her words about commencement being a beginning, not an end. She insisted that "good-

bye" was too permanent a thing to say, but that "thank you for the good times" was much more appropriate for her classmates, teachers, and family.

Amidst the poignancy, hope and apprehension that pulsed through the group of anxious seniors, Salutatorian Megan Vodzak informed her audience that she dreaded adding "cliché" to the mix with her speech, but then admitted that at graduation, clichés were fitting. She went on to focus on the radical change that was about to occur for both her and her classmates, explaining that throughout high school they had learned to have "self-reliance when in doubt" and to "maintain friendships during hardships," and that now they were going to be adults who would have to exhibit these qualities away from the safety net of high school.

As tradition would have it, before the actual awarding of diplomas, the Valedictorian of the senior class, Jered Weinstock, was called upon to impart some wisdom to his classmates. He began by telling the audience that this was possibly the most difficult task he had ever been faced with, and so he fell back on the wisest source he could — mommies, a spin on homilies, which were speeches or sayings meant to enlighten, delivered by a parent or teacher. Some favorites he addressed were "Always tell the truth" and "When you slide down the banister of life, don't get splinters in your rear," all of which he said he would carry with him into adulthood and hoped that his classmates would do the same, as even the simplest phrases carried inherent wisdom that would aid them in numerous aspects of their lives.

Then the main event began, the awarding of diplomas.

As Principal James McGovern read each graduating senior's full name, which were received alternately by howling, hoopla, air horns or jubilant applause, the feeling of pride was unavoidable, both from the onlooking family and friends and from the graduates themselves. Each student was physically expressing pride, walking a little taller and smiling a little wider, especially after each tassel was moved, denoting clearly to the world that it belonged to a graduated senior.

Even after the class had officially graduated, they would not allow one of their own who was unable to attend the ceremony be forgotten. In memory of Winston Kent Taylor, a student who should have been present that night but tragically was not due to a fatal car accident in early December, Nikki Gelso and Jeffrey Finn presented Anne Taylor with her son's cap and gown. The ceremony brought tears to the eyes of many in the crowd, adding heartbreak to the bitter-sweet evening; but, it was further proof that this wonderful young man, who was "down for whatever," would never be forgotten in the hearts of his classmates.

Despite anxiousness about the future, apprehension concerning what was ahead, as well as the difficulty of good-



Christine Zavaskas gave classmate Ashlie Morris a big hug after graduation ceremonies at Dallas High School.

byes and leaving, class Secretary Jana Stec's closing speech opened a door of hope for her classmates. "These are the best years of our lives?" she demanded to know. "I hope not...high school shouldn't be the peak of our lives, but rather the foundation on which we build our futures." She went on to assure the now graduated students of Dallas that though it may be hard at first and uncertain at times, the best is surely to come in their lives.

Finally, with a thunderstorm threatening overhead, "Pomp and Circumstance" began again, and the students in the Dallas High School Class of 2005 made their final exit from the campus.

Remaining behind them in their exit is a legacy of dedication, compassion, and courage, and going with them into their future is the promise of great, great possibilities.



PHOTOS FOR THE TIMES LEADER/CHARLOTTE BARTIZEK

Girl friends Megan Savage, Coral Stredny, Samantha O'Brien, Nicola Gelso, Allison Snyder, Lorena and Samantha Decker lined up for a photo after graduation ceremonies at Dallas High School.



Michelle Luksh paused before entering Mountaineer Stadium for her Dallas High School graduation.



Christina Felix and Scott Gay shared some final moments together while waiting for the Dallas High School graduation ceremony to begin.



Mallory Trojan received flowers from mom, Barb, and dad, Jay, after her Dallas High School graduation.