

by | ben henschel

**AS THE TEXTS** poured in that Tuesday afternoon, 13 years of built-up elation seemed to evaporate for the class of 2020. The envisioned goodbyes, the time-honored routine of each day and the mainstays of high school had been chopped down swiftly and landed with a thwack in the senior group chat.

When Gov. Laura Kelly announced that all KS school buildings would be closed for the rest of the semester, a common sense of shock enveloped seniors on spring break. Senior Lizzie MacAdam was five days into quarantine with her family when her phone blew up with calls and texts, to a point she'd never seen before. Senior Sarah O'Sullivan was at work — the last day before Lumine Salon shut down due to coronavirus concerns — when she found out, grasping the thought that the structure of work and school had dissolved.

A handful of seniors were headed to the beach for pictures when they found out, so they threw on their college T-shirts and their parents crafted columbia blue paper graduation caps. Despite having made their own makeshift graduation on calming Florida shores, the reality of it all was overwhelming. The same disarming unease seemed to overtake all of the seniors, according to senior Elise Griffith. And the ache of the situation still hasn't settled in, she said.

East's senior class is quick to acknowledge that there are many in the world that have it much worse in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. But they won't shy away from lamenting the goodbyes they'd played time and again in their heads for years, trying to find closure in an unprecedented situation with no defined end. Reflection on what they've lost and optimistic outlooks on the future have settled in as their high school years come to an abrupt and unconventional close.

"The realization that you're just like, 'wow, there are so many things that we're going to be missing out on,' I've felt a lot more through the week," O'Sullivan said. "And I just know for so many people in our grade, like some of my friends, it's been really hard to find motivation, and I think, especially for kids where school is kind of their life, and [who are] really involved in stuff, we just need to find a whole new purpose now."

As the days of quarantining and self-isolating drone on, the little details and routines to be lost have piled up, according to Griffith. Senior Gretchen Raedle's years at East revolved around drill team — after spending thousands of hours in East's dance room, the withdrawal won't be one that's quickly dealt with. Reporting to East for practice no later than 7 a.m. is something she'll actually miss now.

Seniors in chorals and chamber choir who planned for years — some budgeting every paycheck — to go on a nine-day trip to Prague, Vienna, Budapest and Bratislava found other plans as the coronavirus swept Europe, and the trip was canceled. But that wasn't the hardest part at all, according to senior Ben Blickhan. It's the nostalgic nature of fourth quarter, what all four years build up to — and what senior Allie Erdner will miss the most.

The senior slideshow played at the last choir concert and the traditional singing of "Old Irish Blessing" to officially recognize the seniors' exit was synonymous with what Erdner envisioned her goodbye to be.

The importance of reflecting on the situation and digesting what's been lost as the weeks progress is evident for senior Jack Slaughter. He spent the last year poring over track rankings and rosters to gauge his chances at the state championship. The potential of winning events at state played on repeat in his head, a motivator that made the toughest parts of training seem minor.

"It's like coming up to the season, getting closer and closer, looking at all the rankings and seeing all the people and thinking you've got a shot,"

# CLASS OF 2020: MOVING ON

*Seniors grapple with abrupt and unconventional end to high school due to COVID-19 school closures*

Slaughter said. "That's the toughest part by far."

There's a hopeful tint to the future for students like senior Reilly Moreland and O'Sullivan, which they feel is equally important to realize. The coming months bustle with uncertainty amid the coronavirus, with possibilities of a national lockdown looming and an extended stay-at-home order on top of the 30-day order currently in effect. But when the virus is tamed and quarantine orders are lifted, a number of seniors plan to reach out and create their own goodbyes, from mini-graduations to special meetings with teachers.

As hard as it's been to let go of idealized moments like the last pep assembly and the relied upon routine of her days at East, Moreland plans to move forward with adapted goodbyes to fit the situation.

"Before I go to college or before schools starts back up, just going back to East, getting that one period of time where teachers have to be there and students are there, and have them sign my yearbook or say goodbye to them is what I'll try to do," Moreland said. "I know I'll see the teachers [that impacted me most] again at some point, it's just hard to not know when that'll be."

Moreland found a friend in Mercedes Rasmussen just as much as she found a once-in-a-lifetime marketing teacher — and despite the ups and downs with some seniors she's had, Rasmussen wants to keep relationships strong in transition to online schooling and into summer.

"Personally, it's a little bit devastating since I have mostly seniors...and I made a lot of very personal connections with the seniors, we spent a lot of time together, we got to know each other on a very personal basis," Rasmussen said. "I think my main concern is to reach out to kids that need some connection and have everyone know that I'm here, that kind of thing...with the positives and negatives and whatever, I felt very close to this senior class from the beginning."

As unprecedented as the situation is, it's comforting to think that the hurried conclusion isn't exclusive to East, Blickhan and Griffith said — and the silver linings

are important to hold onto for

O'Sullivan. The bright sides of the situation, like more time to learn instruments like guitar and to spend reading and writing, are certainly advantages, she said.

And despite the difficulties of the cancellation, it offers an opportunity to build the class's strength through adversity, Blickhan said — to weather the bad times with each other one last time in an offbeat, but resonant sendoff. Although isolated from one another, the circumstance pulls them together in a way, according to Moreland, as something that can be looked back upon as a positive point of inflection.



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**sarah o'sullivan | senior**

For O'Sullivan and Moreland, gratitude that the situation isn't nearly as bad as it could be and the belief that the senior class will be stronger dealing with the high emotions is paramount.

"I mean, I think it's really ironic, because most of us, we're considered the 9/11 babies, the babies that were brought into this world when that huge tragedy happened, and now that we're going out of high school, in a pandemic, it's just like, 'what's next for us?'" O'Sullivan said. "But I think that we're going to have so much character development during this time, and I think we'll be more sensitive to people's issues. People have it a lot worse, so it's important to keep going and I think we're going to be better off for going through it."