

Ode to graduates

by SHERALYN ROMAN

We've seen a lot of selfless acts during this pandemic, a great deal of great behaviour?and I wish it weren't true?but some pretty poor behaviour too. Then, this past weekend, the only kind of bad news that could replace pandemic stories took place in Nova Scotia. Our nation now collectively mourns the utterly senseless loss of life experienced there, marking a new and tragic milestone as the worst mass killing in Canadian history. Despite these grim facts, today I want to write about another group impacted by current events. Perhaps you may think what follows is not very important in the grand scheme of things, but I invite you, dear readers, to recall a time when it was only these ?little things? that mattered most.

Take yourself back to a place when you were wrapping up your elementary school years and staring down the face of high school with a mixture of awe, trepidation, fear and maybe even some excitement too. You were about to leave some of your friends behind, as arbitrary or religious boundaries determined where you could attend high school. Maybe too, you were moving from a small school of 500 to a school with 2500 students! How did you feel? What were your worries? Would you make new friends, would you fit in, would you be brave enough to join a club or try out for a team? In 2020, our grade eight graduates have all of these same feelings. Not only this, but their senior trip (if they had one) was cancelled, they can't leave the house for any reason and quite possibly, someone they love may be impacted by COVID-19. They are leaving their childhood behind in more ways than one. All of our children have been forced to grow up just a little bit faster. Each of us, children included, are attempting to make sense of, understand and protect ourselves from what might feel like an overwhelming sense of pandemonium caused by this pandemic. Have some sympathy for what these kids are experiencing and while chances are they won't let you, hug them a little tighter if (or when!) you can.

Now, think back to that time when your hopes and dreams were really about to soar. You're wrapping up your final year of high school. You've spent a lot of time investing in yourself and your future and you've matured a great deal too. Maybe you experienced your first love, joined the prom or yearbook committee, or captained the team of your favourite sport. Perhaps you mostly sat in the background, planning for that time when you would really shine; doing something you loved, studying what you wanted to study, not what the teachers said you had to study. Maybe now you're heading off to start learning a trade you've always been interested in, or to college or university to pursue a dream. Now ?real life? is about to start. The adventure of adulthood, fending for yourself, feeding yourself, doing all things for yourself?finally, a bit of independence! Nope. Sorry graduates of 2020. Like Jeff Probst might say on Survivor, ?got nothin' for ya, head back to ?.? To what? Your room? These young adults are missing out: on prom, on graduation, heck, they won't even be getting a yearbook with that cute little baby picture juxtaposed against their now grown up grad portraits. No back page full of signatures of friends, no final comments under those grad pictures about what their hopes and dreams for the future are. Prom dress shopping started long ago with facebook pages dedicated to dress sharing so there would be no duplications and tuxes or suits were bought or borrowed in anticipation of the big night. Sure it was sweet that John Krasinski recently threw these kids an online prom but it's not quite the same is it? This stuff isn't trivial when you're a teen embarking on your first foray into adulthood. When posited against a pandemic backdrop that brings its own fears and worries, who can blame our graduates for feeling glum.

I won't lie, I'm a little blue myself. I won't have the cap and gown pictures of my daughter on the front porch and at her graduation ceremony. I won't get to see her receive her diploma or be acknowledged for her hard work and excellent grades. She won't experience walking across the stage in that final salute to high school, be able to hug her favourite teacher or shake hands with the Principal. At this point, it's looking like the possibility of starting her next adventure is also in jeopardy as we hear talk about the risks of opening up universities and residence living in a ?post-pandemic? world. I'm sure the same will be true for youth looking forward to an internship or apprenticeship with the future of many a small business unclear at this time. There is also the practical consideration that summer jobs, to earn income to help pay for school, are equally uncertain.

These issues are not trivial. They are in fact, potentially life-changing. Most graduates feel a sense of pride, accomplishment and that the future is wide open, stretching limitless before them. For 2020 graduates, the future is uncertain. The view encumbered by the

four walls of the homes they are confined to, their hopes and dreams on hold, for an undetermined amount of time. Sure there are worse things going on in the world and hopefully, with time, a brighter future will reveal itself. But let's have a little sympathy for the graduates who don't get to graduate this year, who don't get to party and whose final year (whether Grade eight or twelve) offers no real chance of a final goodbye; to their friends, their childhood or their teens. Graduates of 2020 I salute you. Congratulations and best wishes to each and every one of you. The pandemic might have hit the 'pause' button on your future but if you can ride out this storm, you're well positioned for a future in which you'll confidently conquer anything!