

Rayville High School Graduation 2024

Rayville High School held its commencement ceremony on Thursday, May 16, 2024, in the Rayville Arts Center. While “Pomp and Circumstance” played, the seniors marched from both sides of the auditorium to their seats on the stage, while their family and friends applauded and lauded their entrance. The Rayville High School JROTC posted the colors, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance and National Anthem. Fifty-three graduates were seated on the stage, including Valedictorian Alayna Pyles, Salutatorian Ashlyn Barnett, the other members of the Top Ten, along with the additional forty-three graduates alphabetically ordered behind them.

Ms. Alexis Hunter stepped up to the mic first to deliver the opening prayer. She thanked God for “guiding [the graduates] through [their] academic journey” and also asked the following: “[G]ive us the courage to embrace the future with an open mind and heart. Help us use the knowledge we’ve gained to make a positive difference in the world.” Ms. Hunter concluded with a humble request that the graduates hold a sense of gratitude for their supporters and that they have purpose-driven and enriched life beyond the walls of Rayville High School.

Ms. Adriana Thomas moved to the podium next, welcoming the guests to the ceremony. Ms. Thomas indicated, “Years of dedication and discipline have led us all to this moment... Even though the paths we walk are different, our destination as a class has been reached. High school graduation represents students entering a new chapter in their lives: a chapter that is now our responsibility to write.” She concluded with a hearty welcome to the audience as they cheered on the graduates on stage.

Ms. Michelle Gee approached the microphone next, reading Joy Harjo’s poem “Remember” to a captivated audience. “Remember the sky that you were born under, know each of the star’s stories... Remember the sun’s birth at dawn, that is the strongest point of time.” Ms. Gee delivered an emotionally connected reading as she read the rest of the poem, which emphasizes the importance of recalling key details and moments that have gotten people to where they are at a certain point in their lives. “Remember you are all people and all people are you,” Ms. Gee told the audience. “Remember.” Fellow Top Ten member Ms. Alexis Thomas followed by explaining the theme: “[The poem] speaks to the essence of memory and the interconnectedness of all things,” she told the audience. “This connection to our past is not just about remembering the people and places that have shaped us, but also about understanding our place in the world and our responsibility to the future.” Ms. Thomas linked the poem to the graduates’ experiences as well. “[It] is a powerful reminder as we stand on the cusp of new beginnings,” she said. “As we step forward, Harjo’s words encourage us to carry these memories with us, to stay grounded in our values, and to remain aware of the world around us.”

Salutatorian Ashlyn Barnett was the first speech of the night. Ms. Barnett kept a cheerful disposition as she greeted her audience, especially her family and friends. After thanking many people for supporting her, including her mother, whom she designated her “biggest cheerleader,” she introduced the line of the poem to which she felt the most connected. *“Remember the sky that you were born under, know each of the star’s stories.”* Ms. Barnett told the audience how this line reminded people to know how everyone has a “unique story,” just like the stars and the universe do. “We must remember where we come from,” she stated confidently, “and the experiences that have brought us to this point. It is these stories that make us who we are and guide us on our path forward.” Ms. Barnett additionally was drawn to a second line from the poem: *“Remember you are all people and all people are you.”* With this line, she proclaimed that everyone shares humanity, and according to Ms. Barnett, “We are all connected by our experiences, our emotions, and our dreams.” She urged her classmates to “move forward into the world beyond high school” while treating others with “kindness, empathy, and respect.” She concluded her speech with a gratulatory nod to her fellow classmates, wishing them a “bright and fulfilling future ahead.”

Ms. Sunni Walker, another distinguished member of the Top Ten, approached the microphone with a blend of humor and heartfelt emotion. Introducing herself simply as “Sunni,” she began by acknowledging the overwhelming number of attendees, humorously admitting her nerves: “Good Lord, there are a lot of you. I’m realizing that I should have taken that public speech class after all.” Ms. Walker connected personally with Joy Harjo’s poem, particularly the line: “Remember the sun’s birth at dawn, that is the strongest point of time.” With a touch of self-aware humor, she noted the coincidence of her name and the line she chose, sharing that she was born at dawn, thus making the connection feel especially meaningful to her. She reflected on her own strength: “I like to believe myself to be strong. Maybe not physically...but I’ve endured a lot during these past few years.” She then shared a poignant and deeply personal part of her journey, recounting the loss of her father five years ago and the significant impact this had on her during her high school years. Ms. Walker spoke candidly about her struggles with grief and mental health, emphasizing the importance of her support system in helping her persevere. Ms. Walker expressed heartfelt gratitude to those who supported her, beginning with her grandmother and sister, who played crucial roles in her upbringing. She extended her thanks to Aunt Stacy for her support in both school and life. She also recognized many of her teachers who made a significant impact on her experience at Rayville High School: “Know that I see you, and that I, along with the rest of your students, feel incredibly grateful for you.” Concluding her speech, Ms. Walker congratulated her fellow graduates, expressing pride in their collective achievements.

Mr. Emmory Minniweather delivered a speech that was both reflective and inspiring. He began by referencing Joy Harjo’s poem, specifically the line about the sun’s birth at dawn, relating it to his unique high school journey. “The sun’s birth at dawn is supposed to be the

strongest point in time... But our first steps in high school were not at all bright. Covid shook everyone and it made our first high school experience unlike any other.” Mr. Minniweather recounted the challenges faced during the early years of high school amidst the pandemic. He shared his personal experience of going virtual for the first two years, which he found difficult. “I had gone virtual my first two years of high school. I did not like it at all.” He humorously recalled how losing access to his video game motivated him to focus on his studies: “I told my Mama, ‘I gotta go back to school in person RIGHT NOW.’” Returning to in-person classes in 11th grade marked a turning point for Mr. Minniweather, leading to a successful senior year. “Senior year was actually my favorite. I had one more year of football and one more year with my friends.” He expressed heartfelt gratitude to his teachers for their support and guidance, noting how their passion and dedication helped shape his high school experience. Whether it was making classes engaging, keeping him on track, or offering life lessons, their collective efforts made a lasting impact on him. “I thank you all for making my high school experience the best I could ask for. I will remember this forever.”

Ms. Jaden Williamson delivered a reflective speech, highlighting a poignant line from Joy Harjo's poem: “Remember you are all people and all people are you. Remember you are this universe and this universe is you. Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.” This part of the poem, she explained, stood out to her because it highlighted the interconnectedness of all individuals, particularly the shared experience of graduating together. Ms. Williamson emphasized the commonality among graduates, noting that everyone has significant individuals they are graduating for, such as parents, grandparents, and siblings. For her, the driving forces were her son, her family, and Drew. She candidly shared the challenges she faced, particularly balancing school with motherhood: “I think of all the times I debated if I could keep going with the baby because it wasn’t easy. Life doesn’t stop even when you need a break.” Reflecting on both the struggles and the joys, she encouraged her peers to cherish the memories of the past while looking forward to the future: “Even though this is the end of an era, there is so much more to come.” She acknowledged the bittersweet nature of graduation, a moment of completion and anticipation for what lies ahead. “...[You] are now done with high school and you are figuring out what you want to do next. Maybe you already know, but the most important part of all of this is remembering who you are, where you came from, and why you were doing what you're doing.” Ms. Williamson concluded her speech with well-wishes for her classmates, expressing her hope that they all achieve their dreams and aspirations.

Last but certainly not least, Valedictorian Alayna Pyles took to the microphone for her speech. Known for her eloquence and poise, Ms. Pyles began by addressing the audience with gratitude and reflection: “Good evening, friends, family, faculty and staff, and my fellow graduates. I am honored to stand before you today as valedictorian of the Rayville High School graduating class.” Ms. Pyles anchored her speech in the theme of the evening, inspired by Joy Harjo’s poem “Remember.” She highlighted a particularly resonant line: “*Remember you are this*

universe and this universe is you.” Reflecting on this theme, she urged her classmates to cherish the moments, lessons, and people that shaped their high school journey. “Remember the late nights of studying, the early mornings of practice, and the countless hours of hard work that have brought us to this dignified occasion,” she told her friends and classmates. Ms. Pyles shared memories that encapsulated the high school experience, emphasizing the importance of friendships, challenges, and triumphs. “Remember the friendships we have forged, the bonds we have created, and the support we have received along the way. Remember the challenges we have faced, the setbacks we have overcome, and the victories we have celebrated.” She also reminded her classmates that graduation is just the beginning of their journey: “As we move forward into the next chapter of our lives, let us hold on to the memories of our time here and carry them with us as we embark on new adventures, face new challenges, and chase new dreams. Let us remember the lessons we have learned, the values we have embraced, and the potential we possess to make a difference in the world.” Ms. Pyles extended heartfelt thanks to the teachers whose dedication and commitment were fundamental to their success. She shared personal anecdotes about her learning experiences, such as, “From Mrs. Morris having to teach me the periodic table because I didn’t pay attention in physical science (which earned her a shocked expression from Ms. Littleton, who did not get the opportunity to teach Ms. Pyles her freshman year), to Ms. Jones drilling the slope formula permanently into our brains.” She praised their unwavering guidance and support, acknowledging the significant impact they had on their journeys at Rayville High School. She also expressed deep gratitude to the parents and families for their endless love and sacrifices. “...[We] are eternally grateful.” Ms. Pyles concluded with a congratulatory message to her fellow graduates, expressing confidence in their potential to achieve extraordinary things. “Congratulations to my fellow graduates on this incredible achievement. I have no doubt that each and every one of us has the potential to accomplish extraordinary things in our lives, and I cannot wait to see all the amazing things we will achieve in the future.”

Ms. Pyles remained on stage to ask the Class of 2024 to receive their diplomas. Principal Mrs. Chelsea Chisolm and Associate Principal Damon West awarded the diplomas to their graduates. Ms. Breanna Lamperez took the microphone next to introduce the graduated Class of 2024, asking the students to turn their tassels from right to left, signifying their status as former students of Rayville High School. Lastly, Ms. Quianna Bell moved to the podium to close out with a benediction. After the singing of the alma mater, the students tossed their caps into the air, their moods lifted in cheerful jubilation despite the torrential storm that had begun outside. The audience’s cheers far outweighed the thunder, and the ceremony closed as the book of the Class of 2024 ended their roles as RHS students.

Congratulations to all graduates of Rayville High School, Class of 2024! And remember: “Every day is a great day to be a Rayville High School Hornet!”