

# Diplomas delivered



Photos by Matthew Appgar – [mapgar@shawmedia.com](mailto:mapgar@shawmedia.com)

**ABOVE:** Huntley High School Principal Marcus Belin (right) speaks during a short, personalized graduation ceremony with senior Miriam Selimi, 17, (left) on Monday in Huntley. Belin and other faculty members drove to graduating seniors' houses to personally deliver diplomas with a socially distant ceremony with "Pomp and Circumstance" bellowing from the bus. Deliveries for students who have previously requested a personalized dropoff will continue all week, concluding on Friday. **TOP LEFT:** Huntley High School graduate Julianna Ghanayem, 18, has help with her graduation cap after a short, personalized graduation ceremony in her driveway with school faculty on Monday. **See story on page 6.**

## HUNTLEY

# Traveling graduation ceremony brings closure

By KELLI DUNCAN

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High school graduations, a time designed to bring closure to students as they turn the page on a chapter of their lives, have been canceled across the country in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Huntley High School Principal Marcus Belin decided that his students needed to be celebrated now more than ever, so he devised a plan to personally deliver diplomas to every student this week in a traveling graduation ceremony.

"It was important to really have that experience for them and, while it's not a stage that kids get to walk across, it's still that right of passage," Belin said. "... My biggest message for them in this moment is go change the world for the better, period."

The traveling graduation ceremony was designed to be more personal than traditional ceremonies and allows for students to share the moment with as many people as they want, rather than being limited to 10 tickets, Belin said.

"The community plays a huge role in the development of our kids," he said. "So neighbors, people who have watched these kids grow up ... they can now be a part of it."

Instead of 10 seconds to walk across a stage, graduates personally are honored by Belin for two to three minutes each followed by a few quick photos. Grads and their families are instructed to wait outside of their homes at their scheduled time as the school's team is on a strict schedule to visit about 500 homes in just five days, Belin said.

As graduate Julianna Ghanayen waited outside her home Monday with a dozen of her family and friends, she practiced walking down the makeshift red carpet that her father, John Ghanayen, rolled out for her big day.

"This will help her bring closure to this whole process," John said. "She was really sad about it and then, when

they made the announcement, I was like 'we'll make it special for you, we'll bring everybody over' just to make it as realistic for her as possible."

The roll of red carpet was held in place with bricks on the driveway and Julianna's family and friends sat in rows of folding chairs on either side, chatting excitedly as they waited for the school's bus to make its way to the house.

When the bus finally turned into their cul-de-sac, "Pomp and Circumstance" – the traditional graduation march – could be heard playing from a few large speakers duct-taped to the inside of the bus windows.

"It's time for a celebration," Belin said into a microphone as they approached.

Belin stepped off the bus along with Associate Principal Danyce Letkewicz and a few other district staff, all in graduation gowns. He announced that Julianna had successfully completed all of her graduation requirements and presented her with her Huntley High School diploma.

"That was really nice of him, you know, he didn't have to do this," Julianna said. "There are so many graduates so I'm just surprised. He's such a good man, and I feel like he really loves all of the students."

After a few snapshots by the school's photographer, Julianna walked down the red carpet to the cheers of her loved ones, smiling from ear to ear. Julianna turned, moved the tassel of her cap to the other side and then tossed the cap into the air, revealing the words "next stop nursing school" written on the top.

Julianna plans to attend Carroll University to study nursing before pursuing a master's degree to become a pediatric nurse practitioner.

"I spent a lot of time in hospitals with a lot of medical conditions and I saw how the nurses and the doctors treated me, how supportive they are, how smart they are, how much they do for their pa-

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**Marcus Belin,**  
Huntley High School principal

tients and I just wanted to do the same for others," she said.

Once the cheering had died down, Julianna's mother, Sandy Ghanayen, called out "I'll bring out the doughnuts," inciting another round of cheers.

"In my family ... celebrations are a big deal and so trying to bring as much family together to be able to celebrate was the piece that sparked this idea in me," Belin said.

After finishing his doctorate in education in April, Belin said his graduation ceremony also was postponed, so providing a way for his students to be celebrated felt "personal."

Also receiving her diploma Monday morning was Miriam Selimi, who said that she already felt like a Huntley High School graduate, but was excited for the chance to have her hard work recognized.

"We thought that they were just going to cancel it right away but the fact that they took the effort to actually come to each of our houses really means a lot," Selimi said.

Selimi plans to attend McHenry County College in the fall. She said she still is unsure of what she wants to study, but is looking forward to exploring different areas.

"I wanted to study astronomy but, you know, I'm rethinking everything now," Selimi said.

This level of uncertainty is not uncommon among this year's graduating class, Belin said.

Huntley High School held a virtual graduation ceremony for students on Sunday, which was posted to the Huntley School District 158 YouTube channel. The ceremony featured speeches from Belin as well as the student speaker for the class of 2020, David Ferrante.

"My message to them really focused on moving things forward," Belin said. "And for this generation to be relentless, to not quit when things get tough, to live a great life right? Because we've got one shot at it and we've just got to continue to move through it."

While COVID-19 has made this transition a bit more difficult for students, it also has forced them to take some time to reconnect with family and to reflect upon their years at Huntley High School, Belin said.

"It's about focusing on what we have now in the moment knowing that the future is never promised," he said. "So what are you going to do right now to be a change agent to be a force in your community wherever you go and whatever you do, but also knowing that Huntley High School is home."

Belin said he is proud to see so many young adults leading the movement for an end to systemic racism and police brutality. This movement proves that students like his can and will change the world, he said.

"If our kids can grab onto all of what's going on now and continue to be relentless in their journey to change like this is a pivotal point where we can do that," Belin said. "And so I just want to impress upon them that, you know, here's the torch ... go do it."

"And if you mess up or you fall down ... just get back up and keep moving or, if that's not the path, find another one, but you can only do it if you're aggressive. If you sit and wait for things to happen to you, you'll be waiting for the rest of your life."