



Members of the 2017 Hermiston High School graduating class respond to one of the speakers during Saturday's graduation ceremony in the gym.



Blayne Benham adjusts Lillie Wheeler's mortarboard shortly before the two friends and their class processed in to their school's 107th annual commencement at Hermiston High School.



Paola Carmona takes a selfie before she and her class processed into the Hermiston High School gym for the school's 107th annual commencement.

BIGGEST GRADUATING CLASS EVER



Members of the 2017 Hermiston High School graduating class celebrate at the end of Saturday's graduation ceremony.

STAFF PHOTOS BY KATHY ANEY

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**
Staff Writer

An hour before the largest class in Hermiston High School's history graduated, the halls and sidewalks teemed with family and friends ready to celebrate the special day.

"This is my second grandchild to graduate from Hermiston High School," said Linda Johnson, a grandmother of HHS graduate Gabriela Rosales. "I'm so excited for her future and for her."

Johnson, who traveled from Moses Lake, Washington, was not alone. In the room next door, the 332 almost-graduates waited — some giddy and some nervous about the changes to come.

For some, the moment represented years of hard work.

"Traveling here was kind of a big move for me," said Emilio Landin, who came to the area from Ontario when he was in fourth grade. "Getting that diploma, I've had to fight through a lot of obstacles. Every student has." He smiled. "Ah, I'm getting all choked up now."

Landin said he plans to attend Eastern Oregon University or Blue Mountain Community College.

Some were ready to go and never look back.

"I'm excited to be done," said Mallory Mulcare. "But I'll miss my friends".

Her friend, Jerica Reddick, agreed that she was excited to move on, but would miss the people she'd met.

"I'm going to miss Ms. Robinson," she said. "She gave me the confidence and the motivation to graduate."

Many students agreed that while the promise of new experiences is exciting, they were nervous about the unknowns ahead.

"I know everyone here," said Anders Lind, who will attend Central Washington University for engineering. "Just being comfortable and knowing everyone, I'm going



Myra Lopez waves at someone in the bleachers as she waits in line to get her diploma Saturday during graduation at Hermiston High School.

to miss that."

Once the audience was seated, the largest class in HHS history filed into the gym. They heard from several of their classmates, who encouraged them to take advantage of opportunities, and never forget their parents and teachers.

"You were our first fans," said valedictorian Audrey Lincoln as she addressed the crowd. "We have not made it here on our own."

Kellie Zepeda, who welcomed the crowd in Spanish, told her classmates to remember one important thing:

"Our lives don't end here," she said. "This is just the beginning."

Principal Tom Spoo marveled at this year's graduating class, whom he called the most accomplished in the

school's history, listing off the various honors and awards the class had collectively received.

Karen Sherman, chair of the school board, urged students to remember the power one person can have to do good.

"It's time to reflect on those in your life who have impacted you," she said. "Now is the time to realize that you may be becoming that person who may have an impact on others. Never underestimate the power of one. Each of you is important and can contribute a great deal."

The presentation of diplomas were broken up by some short speeches. Distinguished alumnus Bob Barton encouraged students to find their passion, wherever that leads them.



Hermiston High School alumnus and guest speaker Bob Barton looks out at a sea of purple during Saturday's graduation ceremony.

Ismael Arenas presented the class history, recalling some of the funny moments the group has shared, as well as the sad ones. He asked the crowd for a moment of silence to remember Brok Palmer, a senior who died this school year.

"For me, high school was memorable," he concluded. "You all made my day, every day."

Finally, the students got the moment they'd been waiting for.

"This class has extreme potential," said Isabel Bartley, before leading the group in the turning of their tassels. "I can't wait to see where we all end up."

The students marked the end of their high school years with a little fun — tossing beach balls and spraying string at each other as they filed out of the gym for the last time.

Contact Jayati Ramakrishnan at 541-564-4534 or jramakrishnan@hermistonherald.com