



Alton High Faculty, Staff, Students, Look Back On 2019-2020 School Year With Positives In Very Difficult Situation

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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ALTON - The end of the 2019-20 school year caused much turmoil and uncertainty, as the term was cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But at Alton High School, the student body, faculty, administration and staff pulled together and turned what may have been a very negative ending into an upbeat and positive experience for everyone at the school.

On Friday, which was originally scheduled to be graduation night at the Redbirds Nest, four representatives of the school reflected back on the end of the year, and all of the positives gained from adversity.

While the teachers and administration still miss the students very much, the administration gave much credit to the students for coming through in a big way.

"The thing that we miss the most is the students," said Alton High principal Mike Bellm, "followed closely by the staff, but really miss the students. I was fortunate enough to sit in and watch a couple of teachers as they did the videos with the students, or the online classes, and it's just students being students; that's the best way I can describe it. And the other way to say it is we miss them dearly. When they're having fun, even if the teacher is having to calm them down and get the class going, that's what we miss the most, The halls are empty, and so, the students and staff make this place, and they're just greatly missed."

Bellm tipped his cap to the students for helping get the online classes started when schools throughout the state were closed on March 17, with only one day's notice.

"We had one day to jump to online, remote learning," Bellm said. "And so, I think the students took the lead and did a great job, led by our senior class and our senior class president, Grace Knapp. But they really took to things, and really worked with the teachers. We kind of followed them. Our senior class took over, and took the lead, and we followed what they were doing. Our teachers were absolutely great. In one day's time, they started working with the students on online learning, and there were a lot of questions, grading, turning in assignments, but we worked through all those, we got great direction from the superintendent of schools for Illinois, and we interpreted those directions, and then, we were able to move forward. But our teachers adapted and overcame quickly, and very proud of our students for all the work that they did."

Some big events in a senior's life, such as the prom, were cancelled because of the pandemic, and Bellm felt very sad and sympathetic for them.

"I think that it really hit my heart when we had to cancel prom," Bellm said. "That was one of the toughest things to deal with. I had to craft that E-mail, and it took me a long time, and it never came out the way I wanted it to, because I feel bad for the seniors, that they've had that, and so many other things taken away from them. But the way this senior group has pulled together, stayed strong, adapted and overcame what was in front of them, I'm just super impressed with them that they turned this into something positive. They're kind of looking at it like 'we're going to do something that no one's ever done before, and on one will ever do after.' And so, I'm really appreciative of the seniors, and how they've put a positive spin on this, and handled it."

With the new age of online learning and classes, many of the teachers had questions, and weren't sure how to proceed or what to expect.

"It was just really --- I feel kind of confusing, I think, for us," said social studies teacher Carla Hilgert. "We weren't really sure how long it was going to last, how it was going to look, how to continue with instruction, how to deliver instruction, are we going to come back, what's it going to be like when we come back, how much work should be given, how much work should we give, how much should the workload be, how much should we expect the kids to participate, to not participate, how to, basically, handle the workload was probably the most challenging thing."

If the students missed being with their friends at school, the faculty also missed interacting with each other as well.

"I miss my colleagues so much," Hilgert said. "We affectionately call ourselves 'the mancave,' so I really miss being with them in the mornings, and eating lunch with them every single day. But I miss the kids so much, I miss everything about the kids, I miss getting to see them get excited about their senior year, getting to see them get excited about their Senior Night for spring sports, I miss getting to see them in the musical, the end-of-the-year concerts, their art shows. Mr. Bellm talked about prom hitting him hard. That kind of hit me hard too, in which getting to see the kids dressed to the nines, all excited about what they're going to wear, who they're going with, where they're going to eat, and just everything about what they missed out in their senior year. I miss getting to see that for them."

What turned out to be the final day of school on March 16 was very much a day of uncertainty for everyone, especially the students themselves.

"Originally, we went in for a half-day," Knapp said. "There were probably about three people that said 'you know, this might be our last day of school,' and no one really expected it to happen. And then, two weeks went by, and we didn't go back to school, and then it was a month, and then, it was the rest of the school year. So I think it was really unexpected for everyone, which made it a lot harder."

The adjustments that Knapp and her fellow classmates had to make could be difficult, but she credited the faculty and administration for doing what they could to make things easier for everyone.

"So it's definitely been different to not see everyone as much," Knapp said. "And then, of course, what's school and everything, that was a big change. I think the teachers and the administrators did the best they could, but I think everyone, including them, just got thrown into everything. So it was like 'OK, we'll get on Zoom!' Well, none of us had ever used Zoom, so that was definitely different," she said with a laugh. "But I think everyone just misses being with people at this point."

"I know a lot of people wanted to get out of school," Knapp continued, "and then, when we finally were, it was kind of like 'OK, we want to go back.' We don't get a final ending, a last day. And then, of course, we missed prom and graduation, and I'm in Student Council, so we do a lot of events through that. We have blood drives, and those were the most fun days, because we just got to go down to the gym and all talk. So I think, you know, I just miss seeing my friends, I miss the big events the most, but you don't get to see your favorite teachers again, or talk to the people you may not see outside of school again. So I think that is what's really hard for a lot of us."

Redbird sports were affected by the shutdown as well, with the Illinois High School Association eventually cancelling the spring sporting season, including the state tournament series in baseball, softball, boys and girls track and field, girls soccer, boys volleyball, boys and girls lacrosse and bass fishing on April 21. The unprecedented decision by the IHSA Board of Directors helped the athletic department teach their players very important life lesson.

"I've been in education now for over 30 years," said Alton High athletic director Chris Kusnerick, "and never had any type of exposure to this. Typically, in education, you kind of go back to what you've done previously, and you have things to fall back on. But this was totally a new scenario that none of us have ever dealt with. When the IHSA came out and said we were going to cancel sports, they kind of left open a little bit of a window open for some of the spring sports,. But we knew right away we had to start cancelling games, buses, officials, things of that nature, making alternative plans, still with some hope that something was going to happen.

"Eventually, a few weeks later, when they basically came and said the entire spring was cancelled," Kusnerick continued. "Then, that's when, I think, things finally hit home. Now, we had lost the entire spring seasons for all our athletes, and it's a situation where, you know, the senior year is the big year, and we were finally at the end, and there's so much going on in the spring, with prom and graduation, and then, with the IHSA postseason. It's something that these kids, we always hear about that sports teach life lessons, and you can learn a lot through sports. Unfortunately, our student-athletes, especially our seniors, were getting a true life lesson being taught to them this spring that sometimes, things aren't fair, sometimes, things are out of your control, sometimes, things don't end up how you want them to be heading into the season. I'm sure that it's something they won't forget ever. Unfortunately, it's something that we're going to have to look back on, and still honor the seniors. We have been; we have been trying to do that, but it's still something that no matter what we do, we could still never recover the loss of spring sports."

The biggest change is how Alton High handled its graduation ceremonies. The school developed a four-part plan which started last weekend with a virtual awards ceremony and a parade of graduates in downtown Alton on what would have been the night of the commencement exercises, following this week with a stage walk, where graduates would walk the stage and pose for pictures this Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, and finally a virtual graduation ceremony this coming weekend.

"We have it all mapped out, and they will actually reserve their times," Bellm said, "and they will come here (to the high school), and we're going to bring them into the gym; the stage is going to look like what it's always looked, and they'll have their time on their

stage, with their parents present, to get their diploma and have some pictures taken. Then, the very last thing we're going to do, that will culminate in a virtual graduation. The pictures that we get in these previous events, plus their senior picture, will go onto a virtual graduation, that will be released next Friday."

Bellm also sent a special message to the Alton Class of 2020, in which he wished all the graduates well and praised them for coming through in a very difficult situation.

"To the graduating class, I just appreciate and admire the way you have handled the situation that was put in front of you," Bellm said, "the way you adapted and overcame it, stayed positive and made it something. The biggest thing is the way you took leadership, and led us through this. Really, we followed you, senior class, and we really appreciate all that you did and the strength that you showed. You took what could have been a tough situation – what is a tough situation --- and you turned it into something strong for us. If there's one thing that I want you to remember from Alton High School, it's that in the toughest of times, the staff and the students always pull together and make it through. And it would take more than this to even challenge us. So I cannot thank you enough, senior class, for the way you've led us through this."

Kusnerick echoed Bellm's words of praise for the seniors.

"I just want to say we miss you," Kusnerick said. "You've definitely made a big imprint on our community and in Redbird Nation with your accomplishments, both in the classroom as well on the athletic fields. I know some of you seniors, they're out there, that did not get an opportunity to participate this spring. But still, we liked to continue to remember you and honor you, and we will in each and every way, keep you in mind. Going forward, we wish you nothing but the best of luck in all your future endeavors, and hopefully, your experience at Alton High School will make you a better individual going forward."

Hilgert also saluted the senior class for their leadership and perseverance in the most difficult of situations.

"It takes a lot of grace and courage to go through what our school went through, the community, our nation, the world," Hilgert said. "But I think as Redbirds, they really stepped to the challenge, and handled it really, really well with their leadership, and their commitment, and just taking a positive spin on things. I know as heartbreaking as it is for me to not see them go through their all their rites of passage, it's even more heartbreaking for their family, their loved ones and their friends, and especially for them. But they have a lot of great experiences ahead of them. This is really just the

beginning, and I hope they take this experience, their experiences at Alton High, their wisdom that they learned, and their voice, and be the change that they want to see in the future. I think they can do it."

Whatever happens to the Class of 2020 in their futures, the seniors know that they can face up to any challenge --- and handle it with success, grace and courage.

"I think we've managed it really well," Knapp said, "and I would say that I don't want my class to let this be what we take away. I think we've gone to school here for four years, and that's eight semesters, and I don't think one semester should our experience as an Alton High Redbird be deferred or deterred. So I think it's important to remember everything else that we did. We still got a prom last year, and no, we may not have a normal graduation, but we still have something. I think, especially in this time, you should take the little things and make them as big as you can, because everyone is trying to make everything OK. So, I think to the class, we did well, we did the best, but it's not our fault (COVID-19), and don't let this be what you take away."

