**Class Clown**

*By: Madelyn Hudak*

Good evening, Portage Area High School. It is my distinct honor to be able to present you all with not only an intelligent group of individuals but also some pretty good-looking ones. I would like to personally thank all who have been part of our journey of stepping into these flashy caps and gowns. First and foremost, I send my appreciation to our administration, including Superintendent, Mr. Pete Noel, Principal, Mr. Jeremy Burkett, Assistant Principal, Mrs. Krystal Smith, and Guidance Counselor, Ms. MaryAnn George. Secondly, I would like to thank our teachers, who guided us and rooted for us since the beginning. Lastly, I would like to personally thank all those sitting in front of me, who are here to congratulate and support my classmates and I. It is an honor to address the individuals who have granted me with the opportunity to grow up with their children. *(tone shift)* As the senior superlative winner of class clown, I can only imagine the stories that have been told about me at your dinner tables. However, now that high school is over, please e-mail me regarding my rates. This is a reminder that my mustang mail will no longer be of use, so catch me in the hallway after the ceremony. *(smile/laughs)*

In addition to earning the prestigious award of being the most obnoxious in the classroom, I was also granted another reputable title – loudest. The yearbook girls were kind about it, but trust me, I got the hint. *(smile/laughs)*

You’re probably wondering why I am reciting the titles I have “won” since being a student here at Portage Area High School. You’re probably wondering how the class clown is standing at the podium in front of you. You’re probably wondering where you’re eating once I wrap this up. *(smile/laughs)* But all year, *(tone shift)* I was wondering when I could finally walk out of the school doors – forever.

*(tone shift)* Yes. The class clown. The student who improved to Bruno Mars on the cafeteria stage. The one who made it their responsibility to attend every sporting event possible. Yes. Her. She was fighting an internal battle that seemed to never end. A battle that forced her to shut her door at night so her family couldn’t hear her cry. A battle that no one noticed.

As a successful athlete and student, I have always been told to shut my emotions off. Just keep grinding. So much that I forgot I was a person, too. A person under masses of stress. A person who craved for a night off with friends. A person who just wanted to rest.

I allowed myself to experience so much heartbreak and loss that I down-spiraled by my senior year – the year I was supposed to peak. Instead, I spent much of my time in distress as I sought out the help of others to ease my emotions.

I wondered when it would get better. *(eye contact)* Next week? After Christmas break? By prom? These deadlines I created did nothing but mark yet another amount of time spent in the dark. The opposite of what my classmates saw in the classroom.

This part of me has been hidden from the public up until obviously now. Though I never chose to feel these emotions, they were real. They controlled my life. *(short pause/eye contact)* Who I associated with. How I planned my day. Whether or not I would get out of bed.

I share this side of me – a side that unfortunately feels embarrassing and shameful – because I know I am not alone on this stage right now.

As most of society knows, teenage years are some of the hardest, some of the most emotional, and some of the most life-deciding ones. We all hear of the rising rates of anxiety and depression amongst high school students. We all hear of the kids who choose to sit alone at lunch. And, unfortunately, we all hear of the kids who take their own lives.

We all hear it, *(eye contact)* but who has really experienced it? I am saddened to say that I had fallen victim to this lifestyle. However, one thing that makes me different is that I will use my *award-wining loud* voice to talk about it.

As the salutatorian of the 2023 graduating class, I am sure we can make the assumption that I am a leader in some aspects. I – *(tone shift)* clearly due to my title – am loud about how I feel. This trait, which I was often embarrassed of, I now consider a blessing. A gift that allows me to promote awareness for those who share similar experiences.

The empathy I have for my classmates who, too, experience these mental battles is immeasurable. *(eye contact)* I hear you. I understand you. And, I am here for you.

Though my mustang mail will soon be discontinued (unless they were in a rush to delete it), I still present myself as a resource to anyone, especially my fellow classmates. The only thing that scares me is, who will be your resource in the future?

I find myself worrying about the soft-spoken, the shy, and the discrete individuals that are my classmates. I worry about how they will handle their mental battles in the future. I worry about who will be their resource.

Because none of us know who I am describing right now, whether it be you or the person next to you, please take this advice. *(short pause/eye contact)* Be kind.

I know it sounds cliché, and as a lover of writing, I wish there were a more poetic way to say it. However, sometimes we don’t need the extra fluff and glamor to get the point across.

*(tone shift)* To everyone in this auditorium, I ask that you to simply be kind. Never in a million years would I think I would be writing this speech on such a sensitive and personal topic. The fun and spunky little girl that grew up in these halls quickly developed into a guarded and calmer individual. I was forced to grow up too fast – learning too many life lessons in such a short amount of time.

Despite the heartache I had to unfortunately endure this past year, it opened a door to relationships that I will forever cherish.

To Mrs. Vivian Herman, thank you. Thank you for being there for me with open arms every day. Every third period. Just me and you. The heart I have grown for you will carry on with me the rest of my life. Without a doubt in my mind, I know you will become that special person in another student’s life.

To my most cherished friend, Miss Keira Sossong, I pray to God we remain close forever because *(eye contact)* ladies and gentlemen: she knows more information about me than I even do. *(tone shift)* You are my rock and source of entertainment. Your laugh repeats often in my ears even when you aren’t around. You are truly the light in my life that I needed.

To my father, thank you for always being that fire in my life that I needed. Your toughness often drove me absolutely nuts, but without inheriting that passion and heart you have for everything you do, I would never be able to be standing here right now.

And finally, and most importantly, to my mother… You are the greatest blessing that God has ever provided me. The person who would give her soul to simply see me smile. The person who held me as I cried because I no longer wanted to be on Earth. You are my most prized possession. The love I have for you is indescribable.

*(short pause/tone shift)* Though senior year was not what I have dreamt of since kindergarten graduation, I have finally come to terms with the fact that it is what I needed. It gave me the opportunity to find those people in my life. My resources. The people who, no matter how little or how much I achieve, still see me as me.

My fellow classmates, I hope you have already found or soon find those people. We may feel satisfied right now as we drown in these unflattering caps and gowns. However, we are simply just getting started. This is the start of achieving some astounding milestones but also experiencing some heartbreaking losses. Though the diploma you will soon be given may represent not only adulthood but independence to you, you will still need those resources.

As I part you this evening, I hope that you all understand and feel the truth behind it when I say: *(look at graduates)* I am excited to see you all succeed. I just hope we all get to where we want to be. *(short pause/eye contact*) So, remain smart, allow yourself to be loved, and be kind. Thank you.