

# Class of 2026 - Write your own story

By **LOGAN WATSON**

The BHS Class of 2026 stepped out of the comfort of their high school gymnasium and started a new story for their lives Sunday afternoon, but it will be up to them to decide their role in it.

“Everyone in this room has a story,” Salutatorian Lanee Mathis said during her farewell speech. “Some stories are exciting, some are messy, and some are painful. But one thing I’ve learned is that the hard parts of our life never define us. The day that my sister passed away, I came to school. Not because it was easy, be-

cause it absolutely was not. I came because I was determined. Not only for myself, but because I knew giving up is not what she would have wanted. That experience taught me something I want every person in the Class of 2026 to remember: grief does not define you. Trauma does not define you. Bad moments do not define you. Only you define who you will become. Life is going to throw harder things at all of us. Some people will face loss. Some could be going through things that nobody knows about. We all have different stories, but your story is not over

because something painful happened to you. You can either let hard times hold you down, or you can let them push you to become stonger, kinder and more determined than before.”

Mathis reminisced about the good times, too, and thanked her teachers, family and friends for helping her reach this milestone.

“Despite everything life has thrown at us, we made it to this moment together,” Mathis said. “So as we leave here today and move into the next chapter of our lives, I hope you remember this: do not let the worst thing that ever happened to you become the thing that defines your life. Let it shape you, let it strengthen you and let it push you forward. Because in the end, what matters most is not what happens to us, it’s who we choose to become because of it.”

Valedictorian Yvan Dao echoed a similar sentiment, remembering times when she pushed herself to the breaking point, but in the end, she was thankful for the opportunity to challenge herself.

“High school wasn’t always fun for us,” Dao said. “There were days that felt overwhelmingly stressful, demanding and just overall draining. However, we will one day thank ourselves for overcoming the challenges, learning from our mistakes and

continuing forward anyway.

I came to the realization that no matter how much I hated studying or the countless deadlines for each assignment, it was a privilege. We often forget how lucky we are—how there are so many around the world who would do anything to in our position.”

Dao thanked her family for their sacrifices and support and for having the courage to leave their lives behind and come to America.

“As we prepare to go on our separate journeys, it is important to remember that none of us are leaving here as the same people we were when we walked in,” Dao said. “We’ve all grown in one way or another. I want to leave you with a quote that has always stuck with me: ‘If your dreams don’t scare you, they aren’t big enough.’ Class of 2026, dream big and achieve even greater.”

BSSD Superintendent Dan Black closed the ceremony by addressing his final class of young adults before retiring.

“Graduation from high school is a major step toward what I pray will be an exciting, rewarding future for all of you,” Black said. “It is my hope that Bradford High School has prepared you to successfully meet the challenges that life will present to you.”



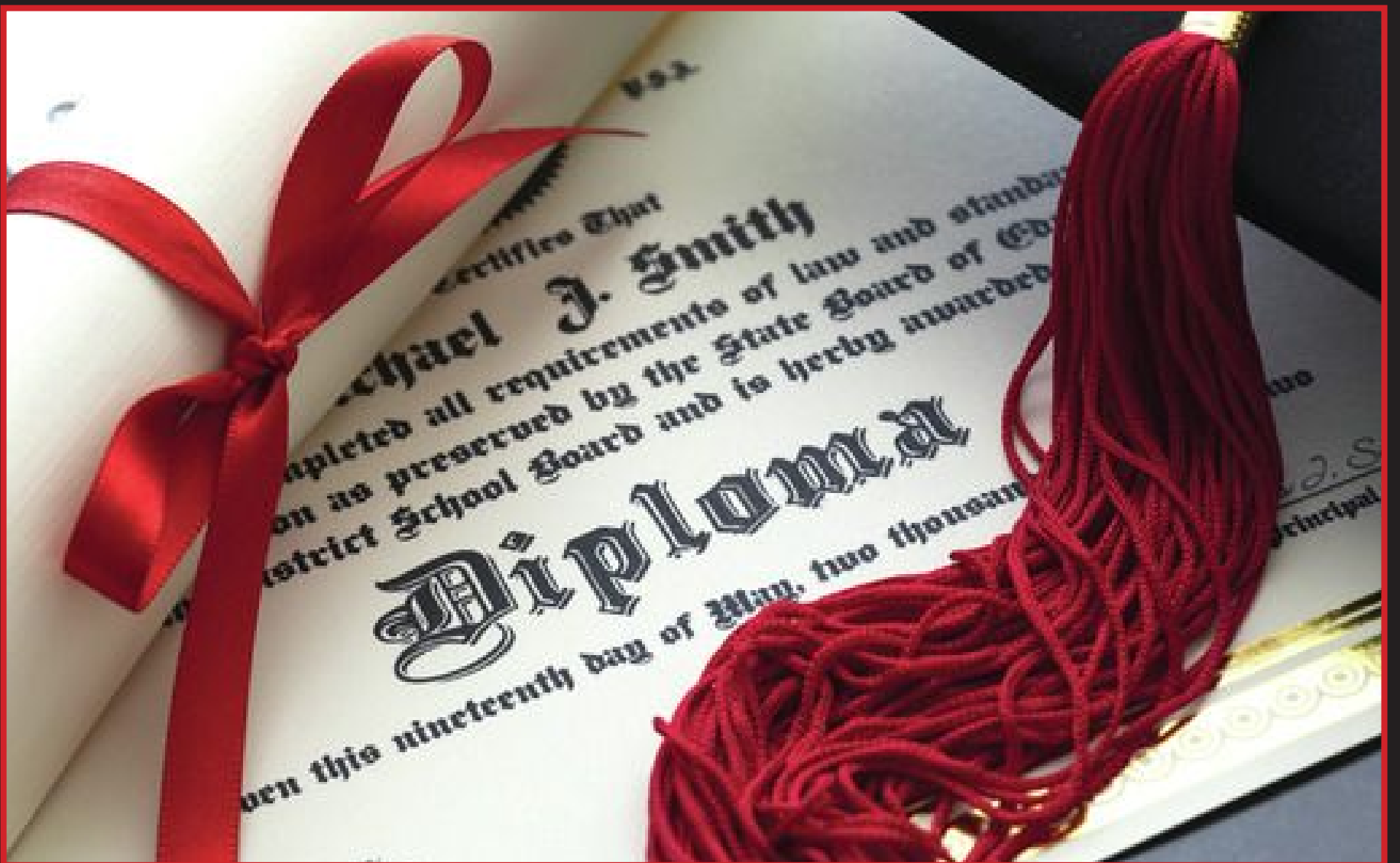
**DREAM BIG** - Valedictorian Yvan Dao reminded her classmates that if their dreams don't scare them, they're not big enough. Photos by Logan Watson.



**DEFINE YOURSELVES** - Salutatorian Lanee Mathis encouraged her fellow Class of 2026 grads to not let their hardest times define who they are. Photos by Logan Watson.



**SCHOOL'S OUT** - BSSD Superintendent Dan Black congratulates his final group of graduates. Black will retire from full-time employment at the end of the school year, but will return in an advisory role until a new Superintendent is hired. Photo by Logan Watson.



## Best Wishes to the Bradford High School Class of 2026

As you celebrate your graduation, a bright future awaits. May all of your hopes and dreams come true as you take the next step toward new and exciting achievements. We recognize the hard work and commitment you've put forth over the years, and we know the education you've received here will prepare you for success along every path.

# Bradford Special School District