

Salutatorian tells classmates to continue to grow and change while chasing what makes them feel 'alive'

Good evening friends, families, faculty, and members of the Class of 2026. I am truly honored to stand before you tonight as the salutatorian of Greene County High School and to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of my classmates.

First off, I should probably admit that this speech was written very last minute... which honestly feels fitting considering that's how most of us navigated these last four years. Somehow, though, despite the nights of procrastination and stress, we all still made it here. And that alone deserves all the recognition.

Tonight is not just about a ceremony, stage, or even the diploma itself — it's about a moment. A moment where we pause long enough to realize that four years ago, this felt like it would never end, and now we're standing here watching it come to a close.

When people talk about high school, they always say, "These are the best years of your life."

And honestly? I hope not. Not because these years were meaningless — they

weren't. There are moments from this time that I'll carry with me for the rest of my life. Moments that shaped us, changed us, and taught us lessons we probably didn't realize we were learning at the time.

But there's something strange about expecting people who are still growing and becoming themselves to believe that this is as good as life gets.

Each of us is about to step into something completely new. Different paths, different goals, and different definitions of success. We're not meant to go in the same direction, and we're not meant to become the same kind of person.

Each of us carries something different into the next chapter of our lives, shaped by our own choices, our own strengths, and our own version of what it actually means to succeed. And what matters most now is not comparing those paths, but learning how to thrive in our own individuality as this chapter comes to a close.

Some of us already know exactly where we're headed

By **Lillian Rose Rau**

GCHS Class of 2026 Salutatorian



next. Others are still trying to figure it out. Most of us are probably pretending to know more than we actually do and that's okay.

Because nobody here has everything figured out, even if it looks like they do.

Maybe life was never meant to be fully figured out at eighteen. Maybe it's supposed to feel uncertain at times. And maybe growth begins the moment we leave behind the places that helped shape who we are and who we choose not to become.

For most of us, the version of ourselves that walked into high school for the first time is not the same version standing here tonight.

And that's the point.

While yesterday and tonight celebrate our visible achievements, I personally want to take a moment to recognize those whose strengths may have gone

unseen... the people who came each day carrying burdens no one else could see, yet still kept moving forward without ever needing recognition.

Because success is not measured by a GPA, a class rank, or a title standing at this podium. Success is perspective. It is how you choose to see your life, even when it doesn't go the way

you planned.

As we leave Greene County High School, we step into lives far bigger than these hallways. And while this chapter of our lives is ending, something else is beginning.

To the teachers, families, friends, and everyone who supported us along the way: thank you for believing in us.

And finally to the Class of 2026: I hope you measure your life by more than achievements. I hope you chase things that make you feel alive. I hope you allow yourself to grow and change. And most importantly, I hope you remember that this is just the beginning. The best parts of your life are still ahead of you.

Thank you.

► Graduation

rank, or a title standing at this podium," Rau added. "Success is perspective. It is how you choose to see your life, even when it doesn't go the way you planned."

"I hope you measure your life by more than achievements. I hope you chase things that make you feel alive. I hope you allow yourself to grow and change. And most importantly, I hope you remember that this is just the beginning. The best parts of your life are still ahead of you."

After Rau made her way back to her seat, Sarah Barfield came forward to deliver her Valedictorian address. Barfield spoke about her experience at GCHS and the struggles and triumphs she experienced along the way. She thanked faculty, friends and family and reminded her classmates they did not make their high school journey alone.

"It is within this stage of our lives that we've grown to be the people that we are today," Barfield noted. "That doesn't mean any of us are finished growing, but it does mean we all have gained uniquely valuable lessons here at this school."

"Whether they were taught to us through losses or victories, we all can be grateful for the tight-knit community and smaller school that we had."

She told classmates she knew in her heart that each of them possess the drive and capability to make a difference to the world, regardless of their path ahead. She encouraged them to pay attention to the example they set for others, regardless of where they go or what they decide to do in life.

"What kind of life do you want others to see you live?" she asked. "In your life, how will you speak? How will you act? What kindness will you

show? What will motivate you? What will you believe?"

"Be mindful of the witness you hold for others to see."

She told classmates their new paths will expose them to trials, hardships and tests of their faith. She encouraged them to attack those challenges head on.

"There will be times where it will feel like the world is just happening to you, but I urge you all to remember that you are also happening to the world," Barfield said. "Take action in the moment. Don't wait. No one is promised tomorrow, so you have to make sure that you are living boldly today."

She wrapped up her address by also encouraging them to lean on a higher power as they face the challenges and opportunities ahead of them.

"I hope each and every one of you will look to God in this next chapter and let Him lead you in every new step that you take, because for God, nothing is impossible."

"And remember: 'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.'"

After Breland left the podium, GCHS faculty member Leah Burch stepped up to begin conferring diplomas.

After graduates had received their diplomas, Jase Mathews offered the benediction prayer.

Austin Palmer then returned to the microphone to lead the school's newest alumni in advancing their tassels and tossing their caps into the air in celebration.

With the ceremony completed, family and friends joined the school's new alumni on the field to continue a celebration, complete with hugs, joyful tears and keepsake photographs to document the special moment.

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Class Song
"Good Old Days"
by Kesha and Macklemore

Class Flower
Hydrangea

Senior Class Motto
"Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory,"
— Dr. Seuss



CELEBRATING
THE CLASS OF 2026

Congratulations on your graduation, and good luck as you embark on the next chapter.
We're proud of you and all you've accomplished, and we know you'll continue to achieve great things.

May all your hopes, goals and dreams come true!



"Whatever you do, work at it with your whole heart, as working for the Lord."
Colossians 3:23

CONGRATULATIONS CLASS OF 2026!



Georgia-Pacific Leaf River Cellulose proudly celebrates the hard work and achievements of our local graduates.

We're honored to be part of a community shaping the future.



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