

VHS 2021 Grads Resilient, Focused, Optomistic

by Linda Baker, VHS 1969

Learning methods and grad ceremonies may have been turned upside down over the last 15 months, but Vic High students still thrive and I'm guessing many are stronger and more resilient for it.

I went to meet two of them recently, to find out how they felt about all the challenges. I left quite in awe of them, and wondering if I and my 1969 classmates would have handled a COVID challenge with as much wisdom and resilience as these kids displayed. It was humbling and inspiring.



Rhea Harper lives in Esquimalt, but was accepted into Central Middle School's Late French Immersion program and luckily into Vic High as well. She loves rugby, roller derby, dance, drama, and has already earned university credits through the UStart program at Vic High towards her Psychology studies at UVic.

Grayson Threlfall is a Fernwood kid and went to Central, too, so Vic High's been his destiny, he says. He's dreamt for years of the day in Grade 12 he can mount the stairs into the Vic High Attic and leave his mark on the wall like so many before him. He played trombone in the Vic High R & B band before that program was curtailed in June 2020, hates PE but loves drama, music, the arts, and enrolls at SFU in September to study Criminology.

Here's what I learned.

How has it been, learning in COVID times?

Rhea: I learn more easily in a classroom setting, motivated by the group discussions and how great our teachers are at engaging us. So last year I found it hard to motivate myself, looking at a computer screen in my room all the time. French was harder to learn, and my grades dropped

a bit. Getting into cohorts in Grade 12 was better, although adjusting to things was hard at first. I did like just doing two subjects at once. The compacted learning helped me focus more easily on my academic subjects.

Grayson: I was OK with online learning and kept myself motivated. I played trombone in the R & B band up until Grade 11. Mr. Emde worked us hard but I miss the dynamics of that group. For some courses I liked the semester system better, at least for the classes I like. But for others it's great to get them over faster. It was funny coming into cohort groups in Grade 12. It was so much quieter in class than before. But eventually things became livelier and more engaged and then you'd start all over again with a new cohort!

How have teachers coped, do you think?

Rhea: Our teachers are easy to work with. They really care about you as a person. Some found the fast switch to online learning easier than others. Each of them had their own approach which we had to adjust to. But overall they've been great.

Grayson: They're really good at getting kids engaged, making learning fun. That was a lot harder for them to do staring at a computer screen. But they really care about whether or not you're actually learning stuff. Yeah, some were more comfortable with technology than others. But somehow they all made it work.

What has it been like not being in the real Vic High?

Rhea: I miss the old building.

Grayson: Me too. I always liked how vaguely haunted it felt.

How do you feel about grad?

Rhea: I'm OK with it. I think the staff and teachers are doing their best to make grad memorable, the most they can do and still be safe. We really appreciate it. Some of my family have such great memories of their own grad, they're not happy we don't get to do much.

Grayson: I'm really disappointed we can't visit the attic to sign a wall. I've never been in the attic. It's what I was looking forward to the most.

Rhea: I had a friend who graduated last year. They were still in the school so she signed for me, so I'm up there.

Grayson: We only know we'll walk across a stage to get our diploma with family watching from their car, and there'll be a photo booth. The rest we don't know. Oh, but I do know we'll get to sign some boards which will end up in the attic. Maybe when the school's open again we can come back and actually visit the attic.

What will you do this summer?

Rhea: I'll be getting a job. Then I'll be at UVic in the fall.

Grayson: I'll be recovering from some surgery, and probably continuing to work for the Gender Generations Project and on the website I created for it. (www.gendergenerations.org) Then I'm

excited to get into SFU. The Criminology program is super competitive, so I'm really glad I got in.

Interview over, we took a quick photo, then they were off to their next class.

It was so interesting getting to know a little about Rhea and Grayson. They, their friends, their teachers, their school, everyone is doing their best in these crazy times. Like the rest of us, I'm sure some are doing better than others.

I think we often project our own fears onto others and imagine how bad things must be for them. But that wasn't what I saw. I saw regular Vic High kids, adapting, accepting what is, setting goals, getting on with things. They're fine. Great even.

It got me thinking about my own grad. 564 of us in the New Gym, dancing afterwards in the Old Gym. The After-Grad at the old Club Tango on View Street. Home for paint and brushes to paint Vic High 1969 on the side of the breakwater. Then strolling through the Empress Hotel lobby as the Swiftsure sailors emerged into the dawn for the big race that day. No autographing attic walls back in those days! Only Publicity Committee folks were allowed up there, to paint posters.

Everybody's grad is unique and memorable. The one organized for the Vic High Class of 2021 will be too. Maybe not what Rhea and Grayson and their friends hoped for, but memorable for the reasons that count - the people, the spirit, the culture.

They might be in a different building for now, and as Grayson says, excited about a younger sibling who will get to visit the attic at graduation. But the Vic High spirit and culture is alive and well and thriving. I left wishing I could just hang out at Vic High more often, a fly on the wall, watching all these amazing kids pursue their learning and their passions, and seeing the creativity and support of the teachers and staff.

It was a privilege to meet you, Rhea and Grayson. Thank you. And thank you to Vic High Vice-Principal Liz McMaster for arranging it all, and for your enthusiasm and dedication to the Vic High ideals of acceptance and inclusivity. It's clear the Vic High motto is as relevant as ever:

Palma Non Sine Pulvere

No reward without effort

It's just that now its meaning also embraces the effort of thriving in a pandemic.

Breaking News: With COVID numbers dropping, Vic High has received the OK to allow two family members to accompany each grad to the stage to receive their diploma and to join in as grads tour the photo booth and other stations set up on the grounds for them. So much better than having to stay in their cars! Thanks, Vic High staff, for making this happen for grads.

Author's Note: How cool would it be to organize these kinds of connections and conversations on a regular basis. Like The Human Library, where you borrow people, not books, to learn about and from someone you might not normally meet. Youth sharing their successes and frustrations, and we elders listening and learning how we can best support and empower them to take their place in the world as proud Vic High grads. Could be good for us all.