



Donn Esmonde

Hats off to this 2002 class president

The class president wore a blue cap and gown. He sat quietly through the graduation ceremony, the usual pomp and circumstance: speeches, music, a keynote address. Proud parents, relatives and the school's younger students, nearly 100 people in all, shared the moment.

The passage from student to graduate is finalized by moving the cap tassel from one side to the other. At 10:30 Thursday morning, Donna Andrzejewski took her son Gerry's hand, raised it and helped him shift the tassel.

It is high school graduation season, a time of ritual and remembrance. The ceremonies are pretty much the same. Yet none is quite like this one. No class president is quite like Gerry Andrzejewski.

He didn't fling his cap in the air. He didn't leap to his feet at the end of the closing song, "This Little Light of Mine." He didn't hug his mother, thank his teachers or kiss his girlfriend.

All that was taken away from Andrzejewski years ago, when fate sideswiped a 6-year-old boy big enough to be nicknamed Moose. A massive stroke wounded his brain and froze

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his body. He can blink his eyes. He can move his thumb. That's it.

He goes to the Center for Handicapped Children, in a wing at Cheektowaga's Maryvale Elementary School. The graduation was in the cafeteria. Now 21, he'll soon be too old for public school. He's moving on.

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doesn't. Freeing the inner Gerry, helping him express his feelings to the world, is what the past 15 years have been about.

A stranger might wonder if there's much to know. Gerry sits in a wheelchair, tilted slightly back, eyes half-closed. His face seems nearly blank.

But to know him is to see the life inside. His mother, Donna, knows him better than anyone. With a mother's intuition, love and questions — he blinks twice for yes, three times for no — she makes contact. He likes cologne and sunglasses, Filá sneakers and trips to the mall. He likes high school football games, especially if he can see the cheerleaders. The Bills and Yankees are his favorite teams.

"I'll read him a story, then ask him questions about it," said his teacher, Cheryl Börner. "He gives the right answers."

He loved the family vacation to California's Sea World, but thought he was too old for Disneyland. He brought his camera, signaling with blinks when he wanted a picture taken. He took his longtime friend, Melissa Bapst, to the prom two years ago at School 84, Buffalo's school for disabled kids. He seemed agitated in the days before. Finally, his mother — after a dozen questions — figured out he first wanted to meet her parents.

"I took him over there," said Donna Andrzejewski. "He was sweating bullets."

The graduating class numbered two, Gerry and Javon Tyler, who pumped his fist in the air as he got his diploma. There were originally three of them. Kenny Grunder didn't make it. He passed away two Decembers ago, on the night of the school Christmas party.

About 30 kids were at the ceremony, in wheelchairs, with a parent or aide. Some of them won't make it to graduation day. But seeing Gerry and Javon showed them it can happen.

More good things have happened. They finally found a click device Gerry can use to send simple voice messages. Gerry has a job. He spends two hours a week greeting shoppers at Galyans Trading Co.

It's funny how life works. Reaching in to Gerry brought out the best in dozens of others: teachers, aides, nurses, friends, relatives, bus drivers. All of their worlds were changed, by one young man.

Bus driver Gloria Marinaccio drove him since he started school, before the stroke.

"He drove me nuts with all his talking," she said. "Now I wish he could say just one word."

There was a reception after the graduation, with pop and cake. Gerry sat in the center of the classroom, with Melissa.

"Give me the camera," said a friend, grabbing Donna Andrzejewski's arm. "He's smiling like crazy."

Good luck, class president.

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