

Circumstances aside, at PALC graduation, the pomp — satisfaction, too — is palpable

- By Felix Carroll, The Berkshire Eagle

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Sarina Mead, center, hugs her friend, Lainna Dexheimer, after graduation Tuesday from the William Stickney Pittsfield Adult Learning Center. A series of individual graduation ceremonies took place throughout the day because of COVID-19 restrictions.

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Mead enjoys a laugh during the ceremony. The Pittsfield Adult Learning Center is a free service provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and Pittsfield Public Schools.

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PITTSFIELD — Before Sarina Mead and 44 other graduates could gaze upon the high school diploma with their names etched in ink, they each had one last circuitous path to take Tuesday.

Like the others, Mead was used to the long way around.

In a series of individual graduation ceremonies throughout the day inside the William Stickney Pittsfield Adult Learning Center on North Street, each graduate solemnly was honored with their very own ceremony calibrated to these tender first days after the coronavirus pandemic lockdown.

In room number one, each was invited to listen in and watch recorded speeches from mentors, politicians and other civic leaders. In room number two, more recorded

speeches, the usual stuff — “Well done” and “Very special day” and “A step along the journey” — all of it heartfelt, all of it taken to heart.

To earn a high school equivalency degree from PALC typically means two things: something had gone terribly wrong at some point in the graduate’s life that had caused them to drop out of public schools, and whatever it was, it wasn’t enough to keep them down.

“A lot of the people who come in here are scared to death at first,” said Bridget Manarchik, the center’s office manager.

“We honor them today for what they have overcome,” said Carly Gaherty, the center’s adviser and outreach coordinator.

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Kayla Glennie shares a moment with her parents, Kristine Glennie-Mutch and Eddie Mutch Jr., during the event.

Glennie is a 2020 graduate who is celebrating a year late because of the coronavirus pandemic.

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For Kayla Glennie, 23, who also graduated Tuesday, the death of her grandfather during her sophomore year threw her life into chaos. He had raised her after her father had left.

Since that time, she methodically has rearranged her life to harmonize with her aspirations. The Adams native made up three years’ worth of class time at PALC. She plans to enroll in Holyoke Community College to become a sign language interpreter.

For Mead, 16, of Dalton, her mother, Sonja Kimball, had been diagnosed with kidney disease three years ago. Mead tried to juggle high school with caring for her mother,

but by this January, she surrendered to the weariness and worry. School could wait. She stayed by her mother's side until her death on Valentine's Day at age 36.

When Mead felt strong enough, she finished her class work through PALC, a free service provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and Pittsfield Public Schools.

As was the case with all the graduates, after the speeches, Mead's family and friends were ushered to the front reception area and advised to have their cameras ready. Mead was led through a tiny hallway decked out with streamers and balloons and into a long, narrow room. There, she was greeted by Chris DeGregorio, a tutor at the center, who first offered her a Kleenex and then a pink rose.

"OK, ready?" DeGregorio asked her.

"Yes, I think so," Mead said.

DeGregorio pressed a button, and from out of a speaker the triumphant strain of "Pomp and Circumstance." Shyly, Mead walked the walk, carefully trying to march in step, until she reached the reception area to thunderous applause and the presentation of her diploma. There it was: Pittsfield Public Schools with the name Sarina Mead in a fancy, authoritative font.

She held it out as she posed for pictures under a homemade balloon arch.

"I did this for her," Mead said, referring to her mother.

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Mead will be heading to Berkshire Community College in the fall. She plans to become a nurse, an emergency room nurse, a busy emergency room nurse.

With the exchange of well-wishes and promises to stay in touch, she thanked the staff and then steered her family and friends back out to the sidewalk, where there were more hugs, more tears.

Her rose in one hand, her diploma in the other, the proud young graduate then led the way down North Street, toward the rest of her life.

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