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Graduates hear from themselves

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The letter that arrived a few weeks back caught South Eugene High School senior Michael Parappilly by surprise.

To him. From him. Specifically, to the 2012 Michael Parappilly from the June 9, 2005 Michael Parappilly. To the 12th-grade Michael from the fifth-grade Michael.

"Dear Michael," it began. "Are you still planning to go to Japan? Remember when you were young you always wanted to go to Japan. Who are your friends?"

It went on to ask if he still liked math, was smart, had his PlayStation 2, loved technology and lived in America.

"I had completely forgotten about the letter," he said.

As high school graduations begin this week, the "letter to the future" was the idea of Parappilly's fifth-grade teacher at Eugene's Parker Elementary School, Kevin Gordon.

"When I started the project," said Gordon, now 40 and a fourth-grade teacher at Laurel Elementary School in Junction City, "I was trying to come up with something that would get my kids to pause and reflect on all that they had accomplished from birth through fifth grade. All the amazing things they had done with their brains and they would do."

The idea was to put their lives in perspective. Consider where they had been and where they might be going.

He did it first as a 25-year-old teacher, then did it the next year and has done it every year since. Thus far, he has sent nearly 400 letters to former fourth- and fifth-grade students at graduation time of their senior years.

“I hadn’t forgotten about mine at all,” said Nika Jin, who will graduate June 9 with her South Eugene classmates. “In fact, I’d seen Kevin at Art and the Vineyard last summer and wanted to make sure what I wrote got to me.”

Jin, who’s headed to the University of Oregon, plans to incorporate what she told herself into the graduation speech she’ll be giving.

“It was a very clichéd phrase that I used in my letter: ‘Live every day as if it were my last.’ But I was actually amazed and very touched that as a fifth-grader I thought that to myself. I thought it was lovely.”

Some kids, says Gordon, will tell themselves to never start smoking. Others will bring up great memories, such as Outdoor School. “Some have even enclosed special items, like photographs, artwork, money — to buy soda — and Pokemon cards.”

A few former Parker kids have even made the opening of the letters a group ritual around graduation time.

“I liked that idea,” Gordon said. “The whole thing has been about creating a moment that is reflective, nostalgic and forward-looking and, at the same time, honors the cycles we go through in our lives of ending one chapter and beginning another. We could all use more of that.”

Some students find they’re just what they expected to be, others changed dramatically, still others a blend of the two.

In fifth grade, Parappilly had a fascination with Japan, technology, math, computers and video games. Not so much now. He plans on studying biochemistry at the UO and going on to medical school.

"The letter was a good way to reminisce," he said. "It definitely made me feel very nostalgic."

South senior Emma Lang's letter stunned her in its focus on the honing of her culinary skills. "Hello Emma," it began, "do you remember me? I would like to accomplish a lot of things between now and the end of high school, one of those things is to take the school's culinary class, so that I can cater special events. I also want to continue playing basketball, maybe even to play on the South Team."

In the letter, she indicated that she would probably go to college "somewhere with a really good culinary arts program!"

Seven years later, she's perplexed. "I guess I liked baking stuff," she said. "I don't remember that (passion) at all."

She did play on South's freshman basketball team, but her passion now is emergency medicine. She plans on attending the University of Kansas' emergency-room nursing program.

"I could tell by my writing that I was trying to impress my future self," she said. "I probably had a couple of people check it over for me. I was a perfectionist."

That, she said, hasn't changed. "Oh, I'm very much the same Emma in 2012," she said.

Jin, meanwhile, was so inspired by getting her letter that she's writing herself another.

"For when I'm 25," she said. "They're good reminders for what you wanted for yourself. And people lose sight of that sometimes."

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