

COMMENTARY

Congratulations grads — it's the time of your lives

GHENT, N.Y. — I was on my way to go running in Central Park on Tuesday morning when I heard a commotion on Fifth Avenue. There was a lot of shouting and honking going on and I spotted parents with their cell-phones raised snapping photographs.



Ralph Gardner Jr.

The cause of the excitement was the Marymount School Class of 2022. The graduating seniors at the all-girls private school stood behind a barricade — so as not to get hit by oncoming traffic and spoil the fun — hooting and hollering and holding up signs encouraging passing motorists to acknowledge their achievement by sitting on their horns.

As I watched their jubilation it was the second time in as many days that I felt envious and frankly a bit old and forsaken. Because there's nothing that quite compares to the feeling of school getting out for the summer. It's a sensation I haven't had in a while. Having it be one's high school graduation year only intensifies the effect.

The first time I felt jealous in recent days came while I was discussing summer plans with my daughter Lucy her husband, Malcolm. Malcolm is a teacher and starting next week he's free to work on his sailboat or go sailing for almost three uninterrupted months. (I always thought public school kids got a raw deal because they had to wait several additional weeks for the school year to end.)

I have no interest in being a teacher; while I enjoy the performance aspects of pedagogy, having to grade papers and indulge over-anxious moms and dads at parent-teacher conferences seems like a medieval form of torture. But once you're a grown up there are

few other ways than as a teacher to experience that peculiar end-of-the-school-year freedom.

Trying to put words to emotions is a fool's game. But there's something so visceral, so imprinting, so imperishable about the sensation that my hunch is that no matter how old you get you'll always remember that giddy sense of possibility as endless summer spreads its wings.

Indeed, my suspicion is that when you're old and senile and memory has largely deserted you, something will still well up from your subconscious and you'll recall walking or taking the bus to school coatless under the warmth of the springtime sun, and surprise yourself at how young, vigorous and buoyant you briefly feel again.

I'm not implying that I'm over the hill, though actuarial tables may suggest otherwise. Or that things are looking pretty bleak. They may be — politically, climatologically, etc. — but you can't

live in this part of the world without feeling that you've drawn the long straw.

My sadness and regret lies in the recognition that no matter how optimistic or content I may feel there's no way to recapture the quiet ecstasy associated with the end of the school year, especially if you don't have to repeat the grade.

Speaking of which, maybe summer reading lists aren't such a great idea. How many kids actually willingly disturb the dog days of July or August by reading "Moby-Dick" or even "Johnny Tremain?" And if you don't are you really going to lapse into bad habits, turn into a juvenile delinquent, and forget everything you learned the previous school year? I doubt it. All summer reading lists accomplish is to induce guilt about the delicious lethargy that lies ahead.

When I told Malcolm I was tackling this important subject he



EAGLE FILE PHOTO

Taconic High School graduates celebrate after the 2021 commencement. There is nothing quite like the feeling of school getting out for the summer — especially if it's your high school graduation year.

suggested a contributing factor supercharging the elation of approaching summer vacation: it's partially the contrast to the previous months' forced march. It's the stark divide between the conclusion of the grinding school year and cramming for final exams, and the blithe irresponsibility of summer that makes the occasion so sweet.

It's also the knowledge that after months of awakening at dawn — and even before first light in winter — and then sleepwalking your way to school and the morning's first classes you can finally sleep in to your heart's content, especially if you have enlightened parents.

After my run I was walking home past the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and spotted one of the graduating Marymount seniors sitting on the museum's steps texting on her cellphone. If summer vacation constitutes a form of vindication and reward starting as far

back as kindergarten, nothing quite compares to those final footloose months at the conclusion of senior year. With college acceptances in, if you're college bound, and whether you got into your first choice school or your fourth as I did, the pressure is finally off. Hopefully, your parents will now go back to living their own lives.

Making those days and weeks all the more precious is that you're not experiencing them in a vacuum. Your classmates are in the same delirious boat. And with any luck you might even be in love with somebody and they with you.

In the spring of my own senior year, after years of homework and getting to bed at a responsible hour, I remember watching an Errol Flynn film festival on TV in the wee hours of the morning. I wasn't even a particular fan of the swashbuckling hero of "The Adventures of Robin Hood." I did

so because I could. The pressure was finally off. And I still made it to school on time. Or perhaps I didn't and played hooky. But who cares at that point? Your teachers' threats that you had to keep up your academic work so that your college acceptances wouldn't be revoked sounded pretty hollow.

So to the graduating class of 2022, I wish you all the best and probably don't need to tell you what you already know: don't take this unique moment for granted. Revel in the coming days, weeks and summer months. Indulge responsibly. You've earned it.

Ralph Gardner Jr. is a journalist whose work has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and The New Yorker. He can be reached at ralph@ralphgardner.com. The opinions expressed by columnists do not necessarily reflect the views of The Berkshire Eagle.

SPONSORED CONTENT

Closing the Technology Gap for Kids with Disabilities

UCP of Western Massachusetts is accepting applications to receive funding for Assistive Technology (AT) for families in need.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY UCP OF WESTERN MA

UCP, through the generosity of their donors and partners, provides funding for much needed assistive technology to help children with disabilities lead more independent lives.

UCP of Western MA announced that families who meet established need criteria may now apply to receive funding for assistive technology to help children with disabilities lead more independent lives in school, at home and in their communities.

Assistive technology, often referred to as AT tools, technology, or devices, can help children with physical, intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to boost performance of daily living activities. UCP provides this vital technology and the funds to purchase these tools for children with special needs in Western MA. While there is no deadline to apply, funding is available on a first come, first served basis.

The agency provides this assistive technology to assist children with mobility, vision, hearing, communication, cognition and behavioral challenges. Examples include communication devices like speech tablets, low vision

aids such as magnifiers and braille displays, smart home assistants for monitoring safety, cognitive tools to boost comprehension, computer access devices for learning, iPads and text-to-speech systems using Optical Character Recognition (OCR).

In an article on "Bridging the Digital Divide for Students with Disabilities," the National Organization on Disability's Board Chairman Tom Ridge said, "If students with disabilities are not given the supports they need to learn with technology, then we will effectively be locking them out of the workforce and perpetuating a cycle of unequal treatment."

UCP seeks to close the technology gap.

"A child who is non-verbal can use a communication board to point to their needs and express their wishes," explains Diana Sullivan, Senior Director of Early Intervention and Childhood Programs, Northern Berkshire

Early Intervention Program, UCP of Western MA. "This enables them to take part in their own decision-making. Speech tools or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) are available as various devices, such as Go-Talk, Cheap Talk, Proloquo2Go, tablets or as wearables like speech watches for ease and convenience."

Meeting the individualized needs and goals of both the children and their families

"It is important for us as a service organization to meet each child's individualized needs, along with the family's goals for increased independence for their child," said Sal Garozzo, Executive Director of UCP. "That's why we offer a variety of technology, which can include AT devices that are low, medium or high technology."

An organization dedicated to educational access, called

FutureLearn, attests that Assistive Technology helps many children with disabilities improve or compensate for their impairments. The list of benefits include:

- Giving children a level of autonomy and self-determination to direct their own care and ambitions.
- Improving a child's participation, well-being, confidence and self-esteem, by improving a child's functioning and opportunities for play and social interaction.
- Reducing a child's need for long-term health and social care, improving long-term health outcomes.
- Improving a child's educational achievement.
- Reducing the burden of care on parents.
- Reducing costs related to health and social care services, as children become less dependent.

UCP of Western MA also provides related Assistive

Technology services, which include AT evaluations, product trials and fittings, along with training and ongoing technical support. Other Children's Programs include Early Intervention, Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention, Autism Waiver Program, and an After-School Program.

Eligibility

This service is available to families that meet established need requirements. There is not a deadline to apply, however, funding is available on a first come, first served basis. Funding for Assistive Technology is made available to UCP from the support of UCP National, through their Elsie S. Bellows Fund, the agency's donors who donate to UCP's Annual Appeal Fund Drive and from generous companies like Berkshire Roots. If you or a loved one would like to apply for Assistive Technology funding, or if you are interested in donating to this

cause, please contact Sal Garozzo, UCP's Executive Director at sgarozzo@ucpwma.org.

About UCP of Western MA.

UCP of Western Massachusetts serves people with all types of disabilities, including Cerebral Palsy (CP). Innovative programs are designed to serve children, adults, families and seniors. The agency is family-focused and offers personalized services to meet the needs of each individual. UCP's assistive technology services are offered across all of the agency's programming throughout Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire and Hampden Counties (Pioneer Valley). The agency provides a lifetime of support, at all levels of need and at all ages and stages of life, from infants to seniors. Other ways to support UCP include attending their upcoming events such as their Annual Golf Tournament on July 11, 2022.