

Idaho town's 'drive-by prom' celebrates graduating seniors from local schools

By Kristin Rodine, Idaho State Department of Education

About 1,000 community members social-distanced along the Main Street 'loop' on a warm Saturday night, most sitting in their cars and pickup beds. They cheered as a line of vehicles slowly passed by, carrying grinning teenagers – some in gowns, one in a mascot tiger suit.



Some seniors wore prom gowns, one wore a mascot suit, and others dressed more casually as they promenaded through Mountain Home to the cheers of well-wishers May 2.

For the small Idaho town of Mountain Home, May 2 was a chance for everyone – families, teachers, businesspeople, police and firefighters, folks from the adjacent Air Force Base – to gather in social-distancing mode and celebrate their Class of 2020.

For these students, their senior prom – canceled like all other customary celebrations during the Coronavirus pandemic – became a true promenade, defined by Merriam Webster as “a leisurely walk or ride especially in a public place for pleasure or display.”

No one kept count, but organizer Sarah Winings estimates up to 200 of the some 250 seniors in the community's three high schools -- Mountain Home High, Bennett Mountain High and Richard McKenna Charter High School – took part, riding and waving in cars, pickup trucks and at least one limo. A police car led the way with a sign declaring “Move Over for Senior Prom.”

“This has been a rough spring for all of us, and it's wonderful the way the whole community banded together to make sure this year's graduates don't feel

lost in the shuffle,” said Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra, a longtime Mountain Home teacher and administrator who still lives in the community. “Police, businessmen, farmers and others joined teachers and parents in celebrating these seniors' hard work and accomplishments. And it's just one example of how Idaho is honoring this special group of graduates.”

Winings, a lifelong Mountain Home resident and Class of 2020 mom, said she got the idea from her high school pastime of “cruising the loop” on weekend nights and a desire to fill the gap left by closed school buildings and canceled gatherings during what should be seniors' most celebrated spring.

“I contacted a bunch of kids to see if this was something they'd be interested in, or if they thought it was hokey,” Winings said. “They loved it, so I set up an event page on Facebook to gather support.”

The resulting “Light the Night Senior Prom” turned out much bigger than Winings expected, she said, with businesses happily agreeing to display giant (28 by 36-inch) senior photos in their windows.



A police car led the way for a 'drive-by prom' procession through downtown Mountain Home, Idaho. Local high school seniors' prom and other events were closed because of the pandemic, but community members came up with an alternative that attracted about 1,000 people.

Allen Niksich, school liaison officer for Mountain Home Air Force Base, featured more than 50 photos of the promenade on his official Facebook page. This demonstration of community caring really changed many seniors' outlook on their senior year, he said.

"Kids seemed kind of sad about this as their senior year, but when you look at it, this gives them something to remember that's totally different and remarkable," Niksich said.