

Head of the class: Worcester valedictorians share their diverse stories of success

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WORCESTER — Four were born and raised in Worcester, and two came here as immigrants. Their passions range from music, to travel, to technology. They are different in many ways, but each has accomplished the same goal: becoming the valedictorian of their high school.

And in just a few months, a new journey will begin for them as they move into their dorms and make their chosen colleges their new homes for the next few years.

Worcester high schoolsCongrats: Names of 2023 Worcester high school graduates

Each of the valedictorians shared some insight into their time in the public school district and what lies ahead of them.

Four have chosen to stay in Massachusetts, while three others have chosen to attend college in other states.

The valedictorian at Claremont Academy is Amy Le, who will be attending Worcester Polytechnic Institute this fall to study computer science. She was awarded the Great Mind scholarship from the university.

Le declined to be interviewed for the story.

Phong Nguyen - University Park Campus School

Since moving to the United States from central Vietnam as a child, Phong Nguyen has grown from a shy person into a leader of his community.

When he first arrived with his family at age 10, Nguyen said he spoke very little English, instead having to depend on others to translate for him, which made it difficult to communicate and socialize.

“I had been learning English in Vietnam as part of the curriculum there for years,” Nguyen said. “But I was not really good at it because I thought I would just speak Vietnamese for the rest of my life.”

When his family moved to the United States, in part to ensure that he and his siblings had access to public school education, he found he had to put in a lot of work, both in and outside of school, to learn the language.

That hard work paid off. He eventually took Advanced Placement classes in English and other subjects, and dual enrollment courses at Quinsigamond Community College. He was also able to get into programs focusing on STEM topics and to participate in cross-country and the environmental club.

As his mastery of the language improved, so did his social life, Nguyen said. That transformation, as well as the people and faculty who helped him get there, was a focus of his graduation speech.

Nguyen said he also became more active in environmental science, helped raise funds for flood relief in Bangladesh, and got involved in research that focused on biodegradable packaging.

His interest in environmental science came from living in Vietnam, where he regularly saw floods devastate people’s lives. He will major in that subject at the University of Pennsylvania while minoring in international relations.

“Sometimes we would stand on top of the roof, waiting for a boat to get to help us because everything was underwater, and sometimes the house would get destroyed,” Nguyen said. “When I learned about a climate change protest in

my freshman year, I got really excited and interested in becoming a climate activist, and I want to use my experiences to bring policy and attention to this issue.”

Nguyen said he chose Penn partly because of its programs that help support first-generation students from low-income backgrounds transition into college.

Nguyen is nervous about being away from his family for the first time, he said, but also excited for the new change.

“Life is going to be very different from what I’m used to,” he said.