

GRADUATION DAY FOR A CLASS OF ONE

Kelleys Island community turns out for Brian Terry's ceremony

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KELLEYS ISLAND, Ohio — If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes an island to graduate one.

Emphasis on one.

When Brian Terry marched down the center of the Kelleys Island School gymnasium to the sound of "Pomp and Circumstance" as the sole member of the Class of 2008, there were more than 80 islanders there to watch him — probably more than half the population that lives year round on the isolated getaway off the coast of Marblehead.

"It's like a family," said Pat Seeholzer, a longtime teacher at the school who retired two years ago but still showed up for Brian's May 31 graduation ceremony.



Brian Terry walks into his graduation ceremony at the Kelleys Island School gym as his family, friends, and neighbors observe. (THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

Of course, his real family was there too, seated in the front row. That's where his stepfather, Rick Holmes, snapped photos and his mother, Cindy Holmes, shed tears as she watched a slide show of pictures of Brian from over the years. His father, 84-year-old grandfather, and other relatives were there too.

But this annual event in a community where the largest graduating class in the last 50 years has been six students has become an important mainstay for others and not just because of the punch and Kelleys Island-shaped cookies that are served afterward.

"It's more than just a graduation for our island; it's a community event," explained Phil Thiede, school superintendent/principal.

People here believe growing up on an island can teach a kid things that they might not pick up on the mainland. They believe there's a trade off for having no movie theaters or Wal-Marts that will serve their graduates well as they prepare to enter the world beyond, teaching them to work with others instead of around them.

MULTIMEDIA

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Brian Terry's graduation](#)

"To cohabitate with only a couple hundred people, there's very little writing people off. It's more working through the issues and getting beyond them. It's a great trait to take back to the big world," said Mayor Rob Quinn.

It all stems from the unavoidable conclusion of Thomas Strassner, an island resident with a child in the school who was at graduation. "Everybody knows everybody," he said.

That's why Brian's mother invited the entire island to a graduation party at her house the day after the ceremony, and that's what she believes will provide perhaps the greatest lesson to her son.

"Everybody sort of learns to support one another up here, and I think that's a good goal to take into a larger community, to remember that you're always part of a community and you need to help out," she said.

Brian will worry about those lessons later. For now, he's just glad graduation is over.

"It was a little awkward just being the only one there, the only one people were really looking at," he said. "You couldn't really hide in the back of the crowd."

The ceremony, which lasted about 30 minutes, included other students in the 22-pupil school, too. Younger kids played “Love Me Tender” on recorders and three 8th-grade students received certificates for moving on to high school.

The star of the school’s 105th graduation ceremony, though, was Brian, who became its 444th graduate. He chose everything from the class colors of green and white to the recessional song, Green Day’s “Good Riddance (Time of Your Life).”

Brian, dressed in a green cap and gown, even had a chance to speak briefly, though not as valedictorian. The school traditionally doesn’t name one because classes are so small and officials don’t want to focus on one student in such a small group.

That didn’t stop Brian’s father, Ted Terry, from indulging in pride for his son, whose name appeared on the school’s marquee for being an honor student and who received a couple of scholarships.

“He’s at the top of his class at Kelleys, because he’s the only one, but he still does a good job,” he said. “I was never on the honor roll. I was never on the merit list. I was probably on the dean’s list, but the wrong one.”

All the hubbub surrounding one student was a stark contrast to the event that took place a week earlier for EHOVE Career Center in Milan, where Brian commuted from the island for classes over the last two years to give him exposure to more students his own age. Its senior recognition ceremony at the Sandusky State Theater included about 300 students.

“It was like a real graduation,” Brian said. “I prefer the larger graduations with a lot more people.”

He’ll have to get used to it as he plans on attending college at the Bowling Green State University Firelands campus in Huron, where he also took some classes this year. He hopes to transfer to the main campus eventually and experience the joys of dorm life.

While Brian expects to spend this summer working at a marina on Kelleys Island, the lure of the mainland remained strong, even on graduation day. As he shook hands, took photos, and played with the tassel on his cap following graduation, Brian already was planning his getaway on an afternoon ferry. On this day, though, it was only for a few hours.

“I’ve got graduation parties,” he said.

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