

WHS Graduates 453; Ceremony Salutes Legacy of Dr. Nelson

By JILL BURKE
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD – Four hundred fifty-three seniors graduated from Westfield High School (WHS) during a ceremony held Friday afternoon in the National Guard Armory.

The graduates processed into the Armory as students from the band and orchestra played. Traditionally, the graduates wear white or blue caps and gowns, but a newer trend among graduating seniors is to decorate the top of their cap with the logo of the college they will attend, or a motivational phrase. It is a way to express excitement for the next chapter of their lives. A constant among all graduates at this year's commencement, however, was a small red, white and blue ribbon pinned to the outside of each gown in honor of Dr. Derrick Nelson, the WHS principal

who tragically passed away in April, at the age of 44, following complications from being a bone marrow donor for a teenager in France whom he never met.

"Today was a very special day for Dr. Nelson. He loved to celebrate the accomplishments of each and every student," Interim Principal James DeSarno said. "We will look back on this class with pride and joy." Throughout this "difficult school year," Mr. DeSarno said that "this class set an example for our underclassmen that we will never forget."

Addressing his classmates, Senior Class President Jackson O'Brien told his fellow graduates how proud he is to be a part of such an amazing class. "A big, bold, brilliant, witty, athletic, talented, confident, kind, and certainly good-looking class," he noted.

"As a class, we've achieved so much

and done so in all walks of life. Our student body has earned perfect SAT and ACT scores, positions in various honor societies, and seats at the top universities in the world," Mr. O'Brien said. "Our class features incredible, award-winning clubs in a wide array of outstanding extracurriculars. We have garnered county, sectional, and even state titles. We have made the Blue Devils proud. Not to mention, having one of the most spirited student bodies in all of New Jersey.

"As we ready to receive our diplomas, remember that it's more than parchment paper," Mr. O'Brien said. "It's a license to drive change, and it doubles as a reminder that we are prepared to make a difference in the world."

Student Government President Brianna Hatch spoke about how although high school did not go exactly the way the Class of 2019 had expected when they entered as freshmen, their experience was greater than they ever could have asked for. "Our time here will be reflected in new roads we pave," Ms. Hatch said. "And we remember to live selflessly and bravely like Dr. Nelson did."

Twenty graduates of the Class of 2019 earned a National Merit Scholarship Program Letter of Commendation, and three graduates made it as finalists in the National Merit Scholarship Program. One graduate, Austin Chen, was a National Merit Scholarship Program Winner.

One hundred sixty graduates were elected into the National Honor Society and 254 received a President's Education Award. One hundred and twenty-five students were honored at different awards ceremonies, accepting awards from 121 different organizations.

The College Women's Club of Westfield has recognized Casey Cohen and the College Men's Club of Westfield has recognized Austin Chen, signifi-

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WHS CLASS OF 2019... Westfield High School graduates and their guests sit during commencement exercises held Friday afternoon at the National Guard Armory.

Susan M. Dougherty for The Westfield Leader

Next Steps Planned for the Reimagining of Cranford Schools

By ROBYN ORR-GIOFFRE
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

CRANFORD — Superintendent of Schools Scott Rubin, Ed.D., and the board of education discussed finalized survey results related to the Reimagining plans for the Cranford school district and discussed plans to move forward at a regularly scheduled board meeting Monday night.

In May, a survey created by Qualtrics, a program that collects data for research purposes, was made accessible to the community with the goal of gathering feedback about the proposed 10 plans put forth by Superintendent Rubin and the board for the Reimagining plan.

A preliminary report was offered in May, which stated 1,937 people participated in the survey, with plans eight and 10 garnering the most support.

Participants in the survey showed the strongest support, 65 percent of those surveyed, for the model provided in the currently zoned elementary schools, followed by four K-5 schools and two grades 6 to 8 schools.

Overall, proximity to proposed school locations was viewed as the most important factor among respondents and a comprehensive middle school was considered the least important.

Plan 10, the most widely-accepted proposal, would keep schools as they are currently zoned, offer full-day kindergarten, allow the current grade configuration to remain the same, with no comprehensive middle school, require no additional bussing and add appropriate educational space at a cost of \$192 per taxpayer.

Plan 8, the second most preferred plan, referred to by the community and Superintendent Rubin as "the compro-

mise plan," would allow for four K-5 schools, two grades 6 to 8 middle schools (one on each side of town), offer full-day kindergarten, require no additional bussing, offer consistent grade bands, allow common planning time, and add appropriate educational spaces at a cost of \$342 for each taxpayer.

According to the survey, 71 percent of respondents are supportive of district enhancements at a tax increase of \$170 a year.

These proposed enhancements that received positive feedback from the community include updated science labs at Cranford High School (CHS), modernized libraries, upgraded technology, enhanced performing arts spaces and accessibility options, air conditioning available in gyms, cafeterias and performing arts spaces, upgraded electrical services, paving, masonry, concrete repairs, and door, hardware and window replacements.

If both proposals (the Reimagining

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HELLO!... Westfield High School graduates march into the National Guard Armory for commencement exercises on Friday.

Susan M. Dougherty for The Westfield Leader

Wilkie Formerly Charged At Detention Hearing

By JESSE WINTER
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

ELIZABETH — Thomas J. Wilkie, the suspect arrested by the Westfield Police Department on June 13 in the parking lot of Tamaques Elementary School in Westfield, entered a not guilty plea in front of State Superior Court Judge William Daniel during a detention hearing in Elizabeth on June 19.

Wilkie was arrested after police found he had a .45-caliber handgun and numerous rounds of hollow-point ammunition inside his Mitsubishi SUV while parked in the Tamaques School parking lot.

The detention hearing came almost a week after Westfield police arrested Wilkie after a report was relayed from the New Castle County Police Department in Delaware to the Westfield Police Department that "Wilkie was en route to the school and may be armed," according to the Union County Prosecutor's Office and based on a preliminary investigation.

Aside from an additional two rounds of ammunition recovered on Wilkie himself, 130 additional rounds of ammunition were found in the

suspect's trunk, according to the prosecutor's office. Wilkie has been charged with second-degree unlawful possession of a weapon, third-degree possession of a firearm in or upon the grounds of an educational institution, fourth-degree possession of hollow-point bullets, and fourth-degree trespassing on school grounds.

The charges leveled against him varied based on the degree of the crime, with second-degree crimes carrying sentences from five to 10 years in prison, third-degree crimes ranging from three to five years and fourth-degree crimes up to 18 months. Wilkie will remain in custody pending a medical evaluation, the details and specifics of which were not made clear during the hearing. Judge Daniel read out the charges and the potential sentencing to Wilkie as he sat handcuffed in the jurors box flanked by two sheriff's officers.

Wilkie, dressed in Union County orange jail attire, responded with a low audible "yes" as the judge laid out the charges. Wilkie claimed to be born in Camden, N.J.

His mother and father looked on

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FIRST APPEARANCE... Thomas J. Wilkie makes his first court appearance before State Superior Court Judge William Daniel at the Union County Courthouse last Wednesday on charges of having a loaded gun and ammunition in his car while parked at Tamaques Elementary School in Westfield on June 13.

Jesse Winter for The Westfield Leader

WPD Thanked for Efforts In Tamaques School Incident

By JESSE WINTER
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

COUNTY — The Union County Freeholders last week thanked the Westfield Police Department for its efforts in handling the June 13 arrest of a man with a .45-caliber handgun and numerous rounds of hollow-point ammunition on his person, including 130 additional rounds of ammunition in the trunk of his SUV that was parked in the Tamaques Elementary School parking lot.

The suspect, Thomas J. Wilkie, of Delaware, has been charged with second-degree unlawful possession of a weapon, fourth-degree possession of hollow-point bullets, fourth-degree trespassing on school grounds and fourth-degree trespassing.

"I'd like to recognize the Westfield Police Department. There was an incident at Tamaques Elementary School last week," said Freeholder Kimberly Palmieri-Mouled, a Westfield resident, at last Thursday's Freeholder meeting. "They were able to act efficiently and avert something that could have been a potentially dangerous situation. I wanted to commend their efforts."

Westfield Police arrested the suspect after a report relayed from the New Castle County Police Department in Delaware.

In the wake of what could have been a tragedy, and Governor Phil Murphy's visit to Westfield on June 19, Freeholder Chair Bette Jane Kowalski, who attended and spoke at the press conference, shared her thoughts and feelings on gun violence and gun control.

"Governor Murphy has introduced a number of new laws to increase gun safety; we already have some of the strongest gun laws in the country, but with 2,000 plus shootings in New Jersey every year, there's still more to do," Freeholder Chair Kowalski said. "Our Governor and legislators have responded to the public demand, and of course it won't end gun violence, but they are steps in the right direction.

"We support our legislators, our local officials, our law enforcement officers and grassroots organizations," she said.

"One day I hope we will eliminate gun violence and have an environment where our children won't live in fear of a stray bullet."

In other business, the Freeholders reflected on their involvement with Pride Month, a celebration of the LGBTQ community, and the Juneteenth events celebrating the emancipation of the last African-American slaves from the surrendered Confederate states following the conclusion of the American Civil War.

Freeholder Angela R. Garretson shared her sentiment regarding the county's communities embracing both Pride Month and the Juneteenth celebrations.

"We look forward to continuing to support our county events such as the Pride Picnic and also the Juneteenth festivities," said Freeholder Garretson. "I saw so many amazing celebrations truly understanding the spirit of Juneteenth. It's about freedom and being inclusive in society. It's not just African-American history, it's American history."

At the start of the meeting the board honored Son's Collision, an automotive repair shop in Garwood, with a resolution lauding the business' charitable donations of restored cars for veterans in need.

There to receive the honor was the general manager of Son's Collision, Paul Brenda, who, along with Chair Kowalski and Vice-Chair Alexander Mirabella, spoke to the impact this charitable endeavor has on the nation's veterans, including the personal freedom which comes with returning veterans having their own vehicle when they come home.

"We feel very strongly about helping our veterans whenever we can," Mr. Brenda said. "The owner, Justin Branning, and myself both have had past family members in the military. We understand the sacrifice our veterans and their families go through, especially when they get back from service."

Mr. Brenda shared how everything went into motion. Son's partnered with Michael D. Boll and the New Jersey Veterans Network, who found veterans in need of reliable transportation. Son's

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Community/Education -- Sports -- Cranford/Westfield 13U Westfield High School, Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School, Cranford High School and Union County Magnet High School graduation photos.

Babe Ruth District Game; Mountainside/Millburn 12U Cal Ripken District 12 Championship; Cranford Gold/Summit 10U Ripken District 12 Championship.



GOV. MURPHY IN WESTFIELD... New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy last Wednesday publicized his gun safety initiative proposals during a press conference in the Community Room of the Westfield Municipal Building. Pictured, from left to right, are: Plainfield Mayor Adrian O. Mapp, Freeholder Chair Bette Jane Kowalski of Cranford, Gov. Murphy, Westfield Mayor Shelley Brindle, and Bill Castner, senior advisor to the governor on gun safety. See story on Page 2.

Kristan McAloney for The Westfield Leader

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