

For Immediate Release

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Pennsylvania School for the Deaf hosts 201st Graduation Ceremony

Philadelphia's chartered school for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students organized an in-person ceremony for graduates, with virtual celebrations for families and friends.

PHILADELPHIA, PA (June 11, 2021) — The Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (PSD), a leader in providing high-quality education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students from across the Southeast Pennsylvania region, held its commencement celebration for the Class of 2021 at the recently renovated School Gymnasium. To ensure the continued safety of all staff, students, and families, in-person attendance was limited to students, four guests, and staff, with the ceremony live-streamed via PSD's website and social media channels for family and friends to join in the celebration. The ceremony was held on Friday, July 11 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. A recording of the full ceremony is available at <https://psd.org/graduation/>.

Peter L. Bailey, Head of School, presided over the ceremony, which included live and pre-recorded speeches from students, alumni, and school leaders. He opened the ceremony noting that it was being live-streamed for the first time in the school's 201 year history, and reminded the 15 graduates that this was not the first time the school weathered a pandemic. He introduced many student and alumni speakers, who presented both live and in pre-recorded videos. Students shared words of wisdom for their classmates.

Kathylean Colon, Salutatorian, shared the class quote and meaning behind it: " 'Be a voice, not an echo.' For us, this means: 'Don't be afraid to tell people what we need, or tell people what we think, or who we are inside.' "

Gia DiGiacomo, Valedictorian, spoke of the special obstacles students had overcome and the class' particularly strong spirit: "We have made our mark on PSD, and now, we will need to make our mark on the world...We will make a name for ourselves, and in doing so, we will make a name for PSD."

The commencement speech was given by George W. Nevil Award of Merit Recipient Isidore Niyongabo. Mr. Niyongabo is the current President of National Black Deaf Advocates, founder and Executive Director of International Deaf Education, Advocacy, and Leadership (IDEAL), and Chief People Officer at The Learning Center for the Deaf in Framingham, MA. Most recently, Isidore was appointed, for the second time in a row, to serve as the Co-chair for the 4th term of the Federal Communication Commission's Disability Advisory Committee.

Born and raised in Burundi, Mr. Niyongabo has been a champion for human rights and an advocate for access to education for Deaf children and hard of hearing children in developing countries. While growing up in a rural village he became stricken with Spinal Meningitis at ten years old and was brought home to die. With the strong support of his family, his educational journey into deafhood started with a 13-hour ride on a bicycle with his father to the school for the Deaf that was far away from his hometown. Eventually, he graduated with honors and moved to the U.S.A. to continue his education at Ohlone Community College before transferring to San Diego State University.

Mr. Niyongabo spoke of the transition from high school as a small river flowing into a large ocean, and how the journey to becoming successful is difficult but not impossible. "As you go into the world, you will keep facing more and more challenges, but I call them opportunities." He talked about surviving disease, genocide and the death of his father, and finally, coming to America. He noted that being kind surpasses academic achievement because of how it impacts those around you. He ended with words of encouragement and hope: "Be nice...You are unique, the world needs you, and I am waiting for you."

The ceremony closed with each student accepting their award and a final student performance in American Sign Language of "the Champion" by Carrie Underwood.

About the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf

Founded in 1820, the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf educates students to succeed by recognizing and developing individual strengths, building confidence, collaborating with families and communities in a nurturing, dynamic, and language-rich environment steeped in cultural awareness of Deaf, Hearing, and worldwide diversity. PSD is tuition-free for over 200 children from birth to age 21 from 26 school districts across the Delaware Valley. For more information, please visit www.psd.org and also join the conversation at our Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/psd1820/> and Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/psd1820/>

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