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last time they would assemble as one group.

There was some concern prior to the program that the ceremony would have to be relocated or delayed due to rain. Fortunately, though the wind blew steadily at times, the rain held back, and the largely student-run commencement exercises commenced as planned.

Following a beautiful rendition of the national anthem by the UCHS Chamber Choir, senior Richard Banton Jr. took a few moments to welcome everyone in attendance.

"On behalf of the Class of 2018, I offer a systemwide thank you to everyone who took part in offering us the opportunity to learn in a stable, engaging and nurturing environment," said Banton.

He went on to highlight the athletic and academic achievements of the many in their ranks, as well as the employability skills instilled in him and his classmates throughout high school.

"Together, these skillsets create a snapshot of who we are to our future employers," said Banton. "We know that our resumes need to contain a strong sense of the abilities and accomplishments that help define us."

In her Valedictory Address, Ally Horinek shared her feelings of confidence in the Class of 2018, and she challenged her friends to "embrace the thrill of uncertainty."

"As we turn to this new chapter of our lives, the pages of our stories are blank, and the possibilities for our futures are endless," said Horinek. "For some of you, that uncertainty can be quite terrifying, but what you don't realize is that you're looking at it wrong."

"That uncertainty is what makes this part of our futures so exciting. Rather than feeling pressured to plan out your entire future all at once, look at this new chapter as an opportunity to try new things and to find your passion. You will never know what you are meant to do in life until you try it."

Salutatorian McKenzie Hooper delivered a message centered on the future as well, remarking that her classmates "should be proud of what we've accomplished."

"We're venturing all over the world," said Hooper. "Whether we're staying in Georgia, joining the military, going out West or up North, joining the workforce, or even taking a gap year to study abroad in South Korea, each and every one of us is pursuing opportunities that are all wonderful and unique in their own right. So, you should all be very proud of yourselves."

Clay Pickelsimer and Michael Victoria took turns that evening walking their fellow seniors down memory lane with their shared "Moment of Reflection" remarks, only to come full circle to the recurring theme of the night – the adoption of a forward-looking perspective.

"May we leave here tonight looking fondly back upon the memories we've made, but at the same time setting sights for an incredible future," said Pickelsimer, as he and Victoria encouraged their cohort to "Raise

Up!" Senior Anthony Grader entertained his peers and graduation guests with a stellar saxophone interpretation of Bill Withers' classic "Lean On Me," a song suggestive of the strong ties binding the Class of 2018.

After diplomas had been handed out, C.T. Hussion led his first "Turning of the Tassels" ceremony as principal of the high school, and John Hill, too, led his first Presentation of Class as superintendent of the school system.

In their first act together as graduates, the Class of 2018 watched on, Samantha Bruce, Amy Parks, Mary Flater and Gabrielle Santilli performed the Alma Mater.

Elena Griggs ushered in the end of the ceremony with closing remarks thanking "parents, siblings, loved ones, close friends, family friends, teachers and staff."

"As we make the next step into the world, may we always remember our roots and

the people who helped plant our foundation," said Griggs. "We are now graduates of Union County High School."

"We are now the ones future graduates will come to for advice and support. We are representative of future teachers, engineers, military members, tradesmen, entrepreneurs, and most importantly, difference makers."

Continued Griggs: "Whatever life throws our way, may we stand strong, give sage advice, and be the change the world deserves. We've made it this far, and we all have the power to keep persevering."

Following Griggs' parting words, the Class of 2018 made its way to a big inflatable screen at the end of the field to watch the class video.

The class song, "Five More Minutes" by Scotty McCreery, played in the background as the students spent five more minutes together in their last class activity.

A fireworks display served as the ceremony's grand finale that evening, lighting up the night sky in a symbolic representation of the bright futures ahead for the graduates of the Class of 2018.



Photo by Shawn Jarrard
UCHS Class of 2018 Salutatorian McKenzie Hooper in the May 25 graduation ceremony.



Photo by Shawn Jarrard
UCHS Class of 2018 seniors lined up to receive their diplomas in Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium on May 25.



Photo by Shawn Jarrard
Vatsal Trivedi receiving his hard-earned diploma from UCHS Principal C.T. Hussion.

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Who is Tom Taylor?
Tom has been in the insurance business 36 years since his medical retirement from the US Army as a LTC. He has numerous awards, such as LUTCF, LLI AIA, Lifeleaders of GA & SC, Instructor for new agents. His awards for the Army include Silver Star, Bronze Stars, Meritorious Service Medals, Army Commendation Medals, Combat Infantry Badge, Airborne Wings, Air Crew Wings, Air Medal, Meritorious Unit Award, Good Conduct Medal, Reservist National Guard Achievement Medal and National Defense Medal recipient.

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