

# Valedictorian shares battle with depression, message of hope at graduation



Grace LoHouse, valedictorian of the senior class at Grand Island High School, offered a powerful speech at her graduation. (James P. McCoy/Buffalo News)

By [Sean Kirst](#)|Published July 20, 2019|Updated 14 minutes ago

Maybe a week before last month's graduation ceremony for Grand Island Senior High School's senior class, Scott LoHouse had a question for his youngest daughter, Grace. She learned in the spring that she would be senior valedictorian, and the honor carried a traditional responsibility.

Scott wondered if she had started working on her commencement speech. Grace responded with a few words that in essence would soon translate into classic writer's answer. She had yet to put her thoughts down on paper, but she was pretty sure of what she wanted to say.

In the end, her core message at Kleinhans Music Hall came as a surprise, even to Grace's parents. As a sophomore, in a story known only to her family and a close surrounding circle, Grace survived an attempt to take her own life. She was hospitalized for about 10 days, then moved into regular counseling and medical care.

With the continuing support of her family and her teachers, she caught up with her schoolwork and regained the passion she had brought to learning since she was a child. The result was becoming valedictorian, which meant she had a chance to address her classmates and the larger community.

She wanted to make it count. After the conversation with her dad, she sat down to craft her message. She had already spent a lot of time thinking about the stigma attached to mental health, the reality that many suffering young people are reluctant to speak of it, or to seek help, out of concern at the reaction.

Grace, 18, decided that her speech was an opportunity to address other teens who might be in a similar place, teens who felt isolated, reluctant to reach out.

"I wanted to say to them there is light at the end of the tunnel, that there really are ways to get through it," Grace said.

The youngest of four daughters, she speaks with admiration of her parents and the work ethic they model. Scott is an architect. He earned his degree as a young man by going to school at night after getting up to go to a day job as a draftsman.

Jeanne LoHouse, Grace's mom, is a tool setter at the General Motors Town of Tonawanda engine plant. Grace watched throughout her childhood as her mother worked full-time on the second shift and still managed to be there when her children needed her. "I saw their genuine love, and how much they cared," Grace said.

She tried to channel all those memories as she wrote out the speech. She started off by thanking parents and faculty, and she honored the memory of friends her class had lost over the years. That led into a third-person narrative about her own experience, "a story about a girl much like all of you, but one that still needs to be shared."

In writing her draft, Grace described her emotional trials and struggles in high school, how she "couldn't see any good in the world and struggled to make it through every single day." She wrote of how her "mental health grew progressively worse," building toward the attempt to take her life. She explained how she looked for help, found support and began recovery.

Michael Lauria, Grand Island's principal, said he read the speech beforehand, as part of rehearsal preparations. He sat down with Grace for a few moments, and simply asked if she was sure she was ready to share that theme at Kleinhans. "She's a very strong person, and she had a strong commitment," Lauria said. "Sitting there on the stage, I was just so proud of the way she delivered it."

Grace said she had thought about the speech for a long time. Her sophomore year had been a period in which she "felt alone in my own mind, trapped and lost," a time in which she "just felt depressed and powerless." Her mother said that depression did not manifest itself as outright sorrow but instead as a kind of flatness, a seeming apathy that was a marked change for a daughter who had always been vibrant and curious about the world around her.

Afterward, regular medical care and counseling helped dramatically, and her teachers rallied around her efforts to catch up. By Grace's junior year, she had quietly stepped back into what seemed to be much like her old routine. "What it all really became was taking it day by day and turning to the people around me for support," she said.

Still, Grace had a new understanding of just how many teens go through similar situations – and how they face cultural stigmas tied to mental illness. At 18, she came to a realization that can sometimes take a lifetime to achieve. Few things change without a willingness to speak of them out loud.

National statistics prove that she is hardly alone among her peers. Depression affects many teens of both genders, and the National Institute of Mental Health reports that 20% of American girls between 12 and 17 had at least one major depressive episode in 2017. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Americans between 10 and 34, a tragedy affecting young people who often carry their burdens in solitude.

Grace's speech meshed with the goals of the [Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition](#), which is leading a public campaign to build awareness of the power of language and shared experience in understanding mental health.

About one in five Western New Yorkers live their lives with a formal mental health diagnosis, the coalition notes, yet many are hesitant, because of cultural barriers, to openly address it.

"We want people to be more willing to listen to each other, and that goes for all different age groups, whether it involves teens, or veterans, or the elderly, or everyone in between," said Max Donatelli, chairman of the coalition, which has collected [almost 2,400 signatures on a pledge to end those stigmas](#).

That same perspective led Grace to a simple conclusion. Her graduation speech was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. When the moment arrived at Kleinhans, she gave her account and spoke of hope, above all else.

"Today is a day to celebrate how far we have come, and thank all of the many, many people that have helped us get here," she said. "It is also a day to ready ourselves to march our way into a brighter, better future for all of us. But the only way that is going to happen is if you fight for it. "Don't give up," Grace told her fellow graduates. "Keep fighting."

She had no idea beforehand how the seniors might embrace her words. The answer came as Grace built toward the emotional peak. Her classmates surged to their feet and applauded, joined by the rest of the audience.

Jeanne and Scott LoHouse said everyone in the family was crying, and afterward wrapped Grace in a kind of collective hug. In a few weeks, she begins engineering classes at the Rochester Institute of Technology, roughly an hour from her home, and her parents say they remain grateful for one truth. They are simply glad they had the chance to help their daughter, and that she is trying to do the same for others whose pain she understands.

"That's always been her goal," Jeanne said. Her daughter's courage provides a reminder that the hotline for Crisis Services of Western New York is 716-834-3131, and that anyone struggling with concerns about self-harm or mental health can call it around the clock. To share such trust, the way Grace sees it, was her true high school education.