

# Surprise graduation for UPrep class of 2020

Rochester black-owned businesses host event

## Mary Chao

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The class of 2020 had to deal with a most unusual year with the coronavirus. The pandemic shut schools down with a quarantine order in place for over two months during what is to be the best time of a student’s life. The senior prom was canceled as were other school and sports activities.

Walter Larkin, CEO of University Prep Charter School for Young Men on Lake Avenue in Rochester, wanted to do something special. He decided to reach out to minority owned-businesses to put together a surprise virtual graduation that students would never forget. Together with Christopher Cardwell, Quentin Gause, Justin Ortiz and Chris Washington, Larkin and the UPrep staff organized the event for the 54 young men.

On Tuesday, the seniors walked into school thinking they were picking up their caps and gowns. Instead, there were treated to a video and portrait photo session that documented their stories and will be turned into a movie.

“Men of color decided to put this together for our young men of color to show that we stand together,” Larkin said.

The students worked hard and deserve the special treatment, said principal Kevin Klein. This year’s class of 2020 boasts a 97% graduation rate.

Class of 2020 salutatorian Raymond Rivera will be attending St. John Fisher College. He was pleasantly surprised by the celebrity graduation treatment.

“I felt like I mattered,” Rivera said. “I like the camera and being able to talk about my journey.”

*MCHAO@Gannett.com*



**UPrep principal Kevin Klein and CEO Walter Larkin with 2020 grad Brandon Street. PHOTOS BY MARY CHAO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**



**Curry Kates, Class of 2020, is headed to Plymouth State University.**



Senior Curry Kates will be attending Plymouth State University this fall. The surprise graduation will be an event to remember, he said.

“I liked all the cameras and stuff,” Kates said. “It made us feel loved.”

The socially distant graduation allowed each graduate to spend about 20 minutes on a personal video about themselves, followed by a studio recording with special effects such as sparklers for a TikTok video, a portrait and video with the principal and CEO and finally a portrait in cap and gown.

Photographer Christopher Cardwell donated his services and will be providing each graduate with a portrait photo free of charge. At times like these, it’s important to come together as a community, Cardwell said.

“Young black men came together to make this happen,” Cardwell said. “People do care.”

**Raymond Rivera is among the UPrep Class of 2020 graduates who are being treated to free graduation portraits, courtesy of photographer Christopher Cardwell.**

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