



JOSTENS

Jostens answers Platinum Equity's call to action with free virtual commencements

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The dream of a run to the baseball state playoffs ended in districts.

An anticipated final concert with the school band was cancelled.

As co-class president, experiencing detailed planning for a senior prom that will never occur.

Thomas Arend, who remains upbeat despite the setbacks, is succinct when discussing how routine rites of passage have been snatched away over the last few weeks.

"It kind of sucks," he said.

The North Thurston (Wash.) High School student is just one of many to see the final months of senior year interrupted by school closings. Gov. Jay Inslee announced in early April that schools in the state of Washington would remain closed through the end of the academic year.

Online learning continues and seniors will graduate, but the familiar scene of "Pomp and Circumstance" playing while students walk across stages may not occur in the coming weeks.

Platinum Equity portfolio company Jostens, a trusted memorabilia manufacturer for high school and collegiate markets, is bringing graduation ceremonies to seniors, families and school officials stuck at home.

The company will provide digital tools and content to offer free online virtual commencement centers to assist high schools and colleges celebrate graduates who have seen the expectations of a traditional ceremony dashed by social distancing measures instituted to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, which causes COVID-19.

The goal is to provide some normalcy during these unprecedented times. While lingering dreams of a typical graduation ceremony may be dashed for some,

Jostens is helping to make up for the sense of loss for all.

"What I see is Jostens providing hope," said Scott Seaman, the executive director for the Association of Washington School Principals. "They're really providing hope for kids, providing hope for the faculty of schools and they're providing hope for families.

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Call to action

On the weekend before St. Patrick's Day, Jostens representatives were gathered for an off-site meeting in South Carolina.

Platinum Equity had earlier issued a call to action across its entire portfolio focused on mitigating the economic impact of the emerging crisis and encouraging its management teams to think creatively about repurposing or redeploying their resources.

Governments were moving to address the growing crisis and governors started issuing stay-at-home orders.

The first reaction among those at the meeting: The potential business fallout.

The next reaction? Anger that students could potentially lose out on routine milestones.

"This is a rite of passage that these kids earned," said John Bibeault, Jostens vice president and general manager/scholastic division.

Adding to the sense of urgency was the realization the Class of 2020 was born right after 9/11 and has lived through two defining moments in the financial collapse of 2007-8 and the current crisis.

Creative juices started flowing. Contingency planning commenced with an able assist from a company official, who is a military veteran.

In discussions with education officials, there were two main concerns expressed: how to feed children depending on school meals and the infrastructure of distance learning.

Shortly after those initial discussions, Jostens moved to address the second concern by making its video series targeting the mental health of high school students available for free.

The virtual commencement idea came next.

Jostens has developed password protected resource centers for students under the direction of principals, collegiate commencement directors and other school officials. A Jostens representative gives access to a protected area on the company website.

Clients receive step-by-step instructions on how to pull off a virtual ceremony.

If a high school doesn't have easily accessible livestreaming capability, Jostens sets it up.

Jostens is hoping to partner with celebrities to deliver commencement speeches.

"We're doing the right thing first ... administrators, teachers and students are picking that up," Bibeault said.

Recognizing the Class of 2020

Founded in 1897 and based in Minneapolis, Platinum Equity acquired Jostens in December 2018. The company specializes in custom class jewelry, graduation products, and yearbooks.

Bibeault has 18 years with Jostens and says the company has become more customer-centric since he joined 18 years ago.

"As times have changed, affiliations to school are not necessarily what they once were," he said. "Traditions change, but when you're in the jewelry business and the apparel business, when you're in the printing business, you're also in the fashion industry."

The response to COVID-19 is a natural outgrowth. The company is also beginning to produce and distribute non-surgical face masks and disposable gowns to help healthcare concerns. The manufacturing will occur at plants in South Carolina and the Dominican Republic.

Bibeault has participated in delivery events for Jostens.

"Seeing moms cry, seeing dads cry, kids cry," he said. "They're completely happy that they're getting that cap and gown. They're going to have something to take a picture in, to celebrate in."

It addressed a need at all economic levels.



"We've seen million-dollar homes," he said.
"We've gone door-to-door in trailer parks.

"It's reinvigorated me and it's reinvigorated our salesforce. I think that's going to make the difference in getting through this tough time."

Arend is looking forward to life after this tough time. The Lacey, Wash., student is planning to enroll in Washington State in the fall, following in the footsteps of his parents.

Maybe in a few years, he will go through a traditional college graduation.

"But for now, Josten's virtual commencement is something he is eager to experience.

"It will provide a recognition for all of us and as well as a time for everybody to have a landmark to say,

OK, this is when we're actually done. I remember this day," he said.

"I can see people sending texts saying congrats, you have the parents and stuff being live streamed, the kids' reactions. I think it will be a cool way to recognize our Class of 2020."