

Gibbons' final graduation class 'brothers' for life

As 65 young men took their seats in the front pews of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary May 29, they were filled with the thoughts many high school seniors have on their graduation day.

Some looked around the packed cathedral with wonder and knew they were about to step into a larger world. Others smiled at a friend who they might not see again. All knew they were a part of something special.

They were the 45th and final graduating class of Baltimore's Cardinal Gibbons High School

Less than 20 feet to the left of where they were standing was a bust of the man their school was named after when it opened in 1962.

Cardinal James Gibbons was watching over them one more time.

"We have grown these four years through both the good times and the bad, the wins and the losses, the fulfillment and the heartbreak" salutatorian William D. Berkey III said "But, above it all, the brotherhood we have here at Cardinal Gibbons has shown through. We came here as strangers four years ago and, after today, we will leave as brothers."

Ninety-nine percent of the final class plans on attending college. The only student who isn't going to college is headed for Marine Corps boot camp in the fall. The students have received about \$3.6 million in academic scholarships and were accepted into The Johns Hopkins University, Columbia University and Georgetown

University, among many other schools.

Dreams of academic success were big for the school in the middle of the 20th century.

Archbishop Francis P. Keough chose the former site of St. Mary's Industrial School as the home for Gibbons in 1959. It was on those grounds where baseball legend George Herman "Babe" Ruth and entertainer Al Jolson once roamed.

He arranged for the Marianist order to come to Baltimore to administer the school.

Four years later, Archbishop Lawrence Shehan presided over the sealing of the main building's cornerstone and the school's dedication. The school served a diverse population in recent decades and, because of its small enrollment, many students thrived athletically.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien announced in March that the school would not re-open in the fall because of financial and enrollment issues. The school had less than 300 students this year in a building that could fit about 1,000.

It was clear, though, that this class was more than about numbers. Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden celebrated the baccalaureate Mass. It was fitting, because he had met with a number of seniors after the school's closure was announced at the Archdiocese of Baltimore headquarters. He shared tears with the students that day as they talked about the decision.

"It was out concern for your brothers in their junior year," Bishop Madden said, "that brought you to the front of 320 Cathedral St. just across the street from where we are now. Surely you the seniors, the graduates to be, showed all and to this day demonstrate who you are and what dwells within you. This is all due, in no small measure, to the years you have spent at Cardinal Gibbons, where you were

privileged to study, pray, play and form what will be lifelong relationships.”

At the close of the ceremony, the now-graduates sang The Cardinal Gibbons Alma Mater. They hung on every word as if it was the last time they would sing it. They wrapped their arms around one another and swayed together. When the lyrics “pledge our loyalty” arrived, their voices rose in unison.

And then they walked out of the basilica, the last graduating class of Cardinal Gibbons. They walked out “Gibbons men.”

“We have certainly come a long way from the timid freshmen that entered the hallways of Gibbons nearly four years ago,” valedictorian Steven R. Antonsen Jr. said. “We are men of faith, men of courage, men of love and men of character.”