

Mesa Valley School Helps Students Navigate Their Own Way to Success



Rachelle Jahnke sings the national anthem to begin the Mesa Valley Community School's graduation ceremony at the Colorado Mesa University ballroom Wednesday.

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By Erin McIntyre Wednesday, May 18, 2016

You would never know what's under Rachelle Jahnke's graduation cap.

The small scar on the back of the 18-year-old's head, hidden under her brunette locks, hints at the reason she transferred to Mesa Valley Community School during her junior year during a health crisis that disrupted her education at Grand Junction High School.

But in the end, the charter school not only helped her get through that difficult time, it was a place she chose to stay because she thrived.

Jahnke, one of 23 graduates of the class of 2016, is among a varied class of peers who chose to take advantage of the school's personalized education and flexible schedule combined with support from staff. One of her classmates has a 4.2 GPA and more than 30 college credits, and already has a job working as an A+ certified computer technician at Capstone Consulting. Another is a teen mom, a junior who worked hard to graduate early and balance work, family and school. Many of the students are home-schoolers, but that's not how Jahnke became part of the student body.

Jahnke came to MVCS in the middle of her junior year, when it was obvious that regular high school just was not working out for her. She'd been getting sicker all year, experiencing major symptoms that were clearly indicating more was going on than the initial diagnosis doctors gave of a concussion, and even beyond a secondary diagnosis of anxiety and migraines as the problem.

It eventually got so bad that Jahnke couldn't leave her room without sunglasses and headphones, because she was so sensitive to light and sounds.

She was a straight-A student and suddenly found she couldn't concentrate. She had splitting headaches and couldn't deal with loud sounds or bright lights. It was impossible for her to read aloud, and she had bizarre episodes where she didn't recognize letters. Her reading level dropped to a second-grader's ability.

"It was just not clicking at all," Jahnke said. "I was at a point where I could no longer learn in that environment."

She transferred to MVCS, a charter school, which helped her earn partial credits as she continued to endure the process of figuring out what was going on. Eventually, doctors diagnosed her with a pineal cystic tumor, and she spent weeks in Houston after an operation to remove it.

Jahnke credits MVCS for helping her keep on track and moving toward her goal of graduating on time, as she dealt with her health issues. The program allowed her to receive partial credit for work, even if she couldn't handle the full classload at the time, as she rehabilitated. She used speak-to-text technology for writing papers, and made quick progress in getting back her strength as a reader.

She maintained a structured school schedule, attending chamber choir every morning and getting out of the house.

But even after the surgery and her recovery, Jahnke decided to stay at the charter school. The flexible structure and support the school offered turned out to not only be a blessing for her when she was sick, but a place she thrived after she got better. The program allowed her to cross over to GJHS for theater and choir classes, and she was even able to attend the American Choral Directors Association honor choir this year.

And on Wednesday, she graduated and sang the national anthem in front of the audience, a huge accomplishment for someone who had to drop out of a production of "Cinderella" because her brain tumor wouldn't allow her to concentrate.

Jahnke is planning on a gap year, focusing on voice lessons as she continues to recuperate. Her memory still isn't functioning at 100 percent, and she acknowledges that it might never be as good as it used to be. But she sure has good memories of finishing high school at MVCS, and she's incredibly grateful for the school and how it helped her during the most difficult time in her life.