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ALERT

COVID-19 pandemic closures are interfering with milestones of growing up around Madison

From the Pandemic numbers, hospital updates and more: Keep up with the latest local news on the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak series

Howard Hardee

Mar 22, 2020



Coraline Salmon, 8, and brother Sean, 13, are not able to attend karate classes at Black Belt America because of COVID-19, so they've been practicing at home in Middleton. **COVID-19 pandemic closures are interfering with milestones of**



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Among the many social upheavals related to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, children and teenagers around Madison are being robbed of priceless experiences, including some they've anticipated for their entire lives.

Consider a high school senior who almost certainly won't get to play her final season of soccer, go to prom with her boyfriend, or hang out with her friends before they graduate and go different ways. Given the uncertainty of when society will start up again, the graduation ceremony itself could be called off, too.

For 18-year-old McFarland High School senior Maeve Christlieb, who is captain of the girl's soccer team, the most disappointing part of the school closures is not getting one last chance at a state title.

“This was supposed to be our year,” she said. “We have a really good team, and we have a really good chance of going to state and making a deep playoff run. That’s what we should have done last year, but we fell in the sectional semis on (penalty kicks), and we definitely could have won that game. We’ve been working so hard for the last nine months.”

The team has been lifting weights and hitting open gyms all winter, “and now we don’t even know if we’ll have a season,” Christlieb said.

On Thursday, Madison School District announced that its **prom had been canceled**, along with a host of other spring events. McFarland School District has yet to make a similar announcement, but it feels like a matter of time, Christlieb said.

She's been struggling with the sense that her final spring semester shouldn't be over yet, and that she has only one chance at certain milestones.

"I don't feel like I'm getting closure on high school, and on a bigger scale, my childhood," she said. "You're supposed to have those moments of going to prom and getting the chance to win a state title. You're supposed to have senior night and graduation. To not have those moments feels like, 'What do I do?' I feel so lost."

Christlieb's busy life may have stopped abruptly, but she gets why — and so do most of the students in her social circle, she said.

"There's a misconception that young people aren't taking the pandemic seriously, or that they're making it all about themselves," she said. "It's just frustrating because these are things all the other classes get to experience, but we don't. We understand there needs to be an isolation period, that people need to stay at home and classes need to be canceled. We just want things to go back to normal."

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Youth theater on pause

High school students aren't the only ones missing out on milestones and opportunities to make lasting memories. Students of all ages have been forced to quickly adjust their expectations as recitals, tournaments and seasons are lost to COVID-19.

The School of Madison Ballet, for example, normally provides lessons Monday through Saturday and works on productions throughout the year. But it has suspended classes until at least April 13, meaning about 160 ballet students are unable to practice in the studio, said director Rachelle Butler.

The spring ballet "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which involved professional dancers and students from age 7 to 16, was canceled a month into rehearsals. The show had been scheduled for performances at Overture Center for the Arts on April 11 and 12.

“Especially this year, we were excited to be on the Capitol Theatre stage at Overture, so that’s a really big loss for them,” Butler said. “We also have some students who are going to be graduating this year who won’t have the opportunity to hang out with their ballet friends.”

Butler is putting together materials for online learning, including lessons on human musculature, the history of ballet, and conditioning dancers can do at home. “We’re looking at more of the intellectual side of ballet, so they have even more tools when they get back in the studio,” she said.

Under similar circumstances, theater students at Monona Grove High School were preparing for April performances of “Mary Poppins,” complete with flying actors on wires. The show was postponed indefinitely, though there’s still hope of putting it on in May, said longtime choral instructor Lori Nahirniak.

“There is no way we can replicate face-to-face education, and my heart breaks for the kids who are losing out on these lifelong memories, not to mention the seniors who will never have these experiences again,” she said.

Verona Area Community Theater also canceled four April shows, casting aside months of preparation and disappointing hundreds of young actors.

The company's kindergartners and first-graders were putting on a show called "Pajama Party"; second- through fourth-graders were doing "Seussical KIDS"; fifth- through eighth-graders were rehearsing "Footloose"; and high schoolers were taking on "Chicago." The sets and costumes for all four shows were ready to go, said Dee Baldock, founder of Verona Area Community Theater.

"Obviously, it's a financial loss for us," she said. "What makes me much, much sadder is that those kids worked so hard and never got to perform."

Callie Lederer, 9, was set to play JoJo, one of the lead roles in "Seussical KIDS." The first rehearsal was on Jan. 5, but she's actually been preparing for much longer.

"Since spring of 2018, I've been working on the songs," said Callie, a fourth-grader at Verona Area Core Knowledge Charter School. "I'd been wishing to play JoJo because it's, like, one of the main characters and she's in a lot of the play."

She's had a few virtual playdates to keep up social interactions during the time apart from her peers, said her mother, Sarah Lederer. And Callie has been practicing the songs and dances from the show "just in case we're able to find a way to perform it in some way," Lederer said. "We're hopeful we'll find a way to get the kids together at some point."

Callie, meanwhile, is “very disappointed,” she said. “We put a lot of hard time and effort into it, and we were going to perform for lots of people. It’s kind of sad.”

Honing karate chops at home

About 150 karate masters in training were supposed to attend a graduation ceremony on Friday at Black Belt America on Odana Road, where each student would be tested and move up a belt, said Theresa Wideman, who owns the facility with her husband, Don.

But with Black Belt America closed in observance of the social distancing advisory from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, students who were prepared to test on Friday submitted videos of their routines instead. They will receive their belts in the mail, then compete in a video contest for who can most creatively unbox their belts with martial arts moves.

The karate school has about 300 students, and offers all-day summer camps and after-school programs emphasizing life skills and character building. Wideman believes it's important to keep the programs going in some form during the public health crisis. COVID-19 pandemic closures are interfering with milestones of HIS

“The most important thing is that these families are staying active and engaged with as many normal activities as they can,” she said. “Especially for kids — routine is so good for them. Making sure they have goals and that they’re staying on track and making progress, those are core parts of our program. So, we’re really trying to keep people engaged in martial arts so they have some sense of normalcy, and so when things do get back to normal, they’re not too far behind.”

Black Belt America students Coraline and Sean Salmon have been training at home. Sean, 13, is a seventh-grader at Eagle School, and he’s working on becoming a second-degree black belt.

“He’s been making us work out every night,” said Allison, his mother, who also practices karate. “I told him, ‘I can’t do any more cardio — we’ve done cardio three nights in a row.’”

Coraline, 8, is a third-grader at West Middleton Elementary. She moved up to a red belt after recently submitting a video of her forms and combos to a private Facebook group.

“It’s been hard for Coraline, especially, being out of school,” Allison said. “My 13-year-old plays online games and already has ways to keep in touch with his friends, but she’s not online. With no school and no karate, it’s really cut down on social things. She’s been excited to move forward with karate, so it was really hard when it was like, ‘Well, graduation’s not going to happen.’ Hearing that they were doing the online stuff and that she could still get her belt, she was so happy.”

Coraline, for her part, said she was “sad” and “mad” about her karate graduation not occurring in person.

Facing the prospect of not being able to compete in tournaments over the next couple of months as the new coronavirus pandemic plays out, Sean lamented “not getting any Culver’s” on rides back from Minnesota. And he couldn’t say why, exactly, he’s continued honing his karate chops at home.

“I honestly don’t know,” he said. “I guess it’s fun?”

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story has been updated to correct the name of Don Wideman.

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Maeve Christlieb, 18, a senior at McFarland High School

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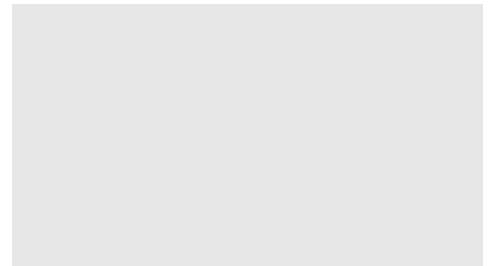
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