



Clements High School graduates will have their Project Graduation on campus this year

PROJECT

Graduation

How Sugar Land Seniors

Celebrate the End of High School

Written by Jennifer Heath

*M*ost parents would love for their children to be a statistic. Highest SAT score, most free throws in their high school career, or fewest times curfew was missed. However, one statistic all parents are trying to avoid tagging onto their children is being involved in an alcohol-related death.

A Safe Place to Celebrate

Many high school organizations have stepped up to be part of a solution to ending drunk driving related accidents and deaths. Project Graduation is an event designed to attract seniors to a designated location on the night of graduation. At the event, students are bombarded with free games, food, and prizes. "Programs such as Project Graduation are important because it provides graduates a safe haven to have fun through prevention activities and partnerships with the community," says Hope Rangel, Texas spokeswoman for MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving).

In the Fort Bend Independent School District, eight out of the 10 high schools participate in Pro Grad events. "I want every senior at Hightower High School to be successful, no matter where their post-graduation plans may lead them," says Angela Johnson, with Hightower Pro Grad. "The only way they will even have the opportunity to be a productive citizen and have a successful life is to not become a graduation night statistic. That's why I'm involved, to ensure that our kids have a safe place to celebrate their rights of passage."

According to MADD statistics, 2,034 Texas teenagers, ages 15-20, were killed in alcohol-related traffic crashes in 2005. Of those, 290 youth were killed during weekends from March 1 to May 31. "Our kids are faced with very different challenges than we did at their age," says Johnson. "The pressures in the life of a teenager are bigger, more addicting, and more life-threatening than ever before. What they want, and more importantly what they need, is a safe place. On graduation night, Pro Grad offers them a safe place to celebrate."

Pro Grad preparation starts well in advance of the actual graduation night. Parent volunteers begin planning the evening a year before its debut. "It's a lot of work, but it's very rewarding when you get the thanks from all the students," says Wendy Sweeney, a Dulles High School Pro Grad chair. "We try to make it the best night we can for all the kids."

Preparing for the Party

Dozens of parents and students volunteer hundreds of hours to make each school's Pro Grad successful. "This is great because it doesn't exclude, but it includes all who wish to attend," says Loren Dickson with Austin High School Pro Grad. "It's important for AHS in that it has students and parents working toward a common goal and having fun doing it. It's a type of bonding during their senior year."

Organizers send letters out to the community asking for their help in supporting the event. On average, volunteers raise between \$30,000 and \$100,000 throughout the course of the year. In order for the thousands of dollars to be raised, the students and parents raise money in various ways. They sell T-shirts, put on fashion shows, wash cars, hold raffles, and conduct auctions. At Kempner High, students expect Rock Fest, a tradition that began more than 10 years ago to generate money for Pro Grad. Student bands compete to be dubbed the best band at the school.

“On graduation night, Pro Grad offers them a safe place to celebrate.”

-Anjela Johnson



Kempner High School holds Rock Fest, an annual competition to name the schools best band and to help pay for Project Graduation

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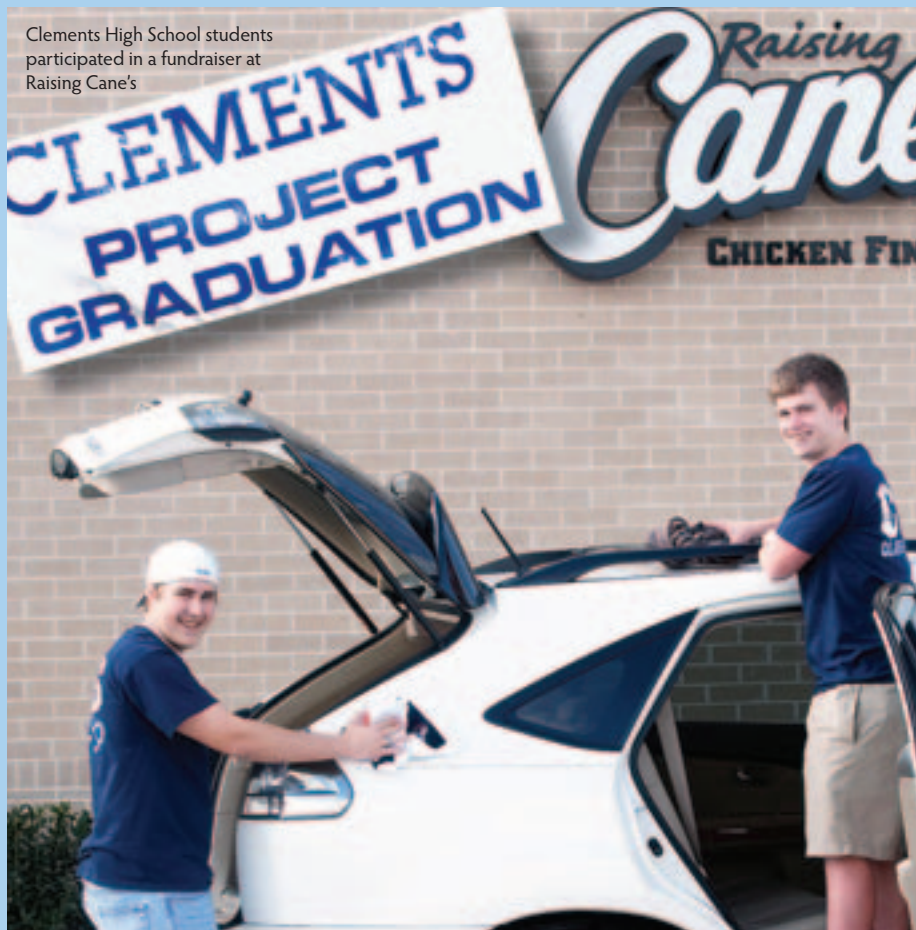
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Clements High School students participated in a fundraiser at Raising Cane's

Graduation Lowdown

All Fort Bend ISD high schools will hold graduation ceremonies at the Toyota Center.

6/5

Kempner High School

Commencement at 9 a.m.
Project Graduation to be held on campus that night.

Clements High School

Commencement at 11:30 a.m.
Project Graduation to be held on campus that night.

Willowridge High School

Commencement at 2 p.m.
No Project Graduation is planned this year.

Austin High School

Commencement at 4 p.m.
Project Graduation to be held on campus that night.

Dulles High School

Commencement at 6 p.m.
Project Graduation to be held on campus that night.

6/6

Travis High School

Commencement at 9 a.m.
Project Graduation to be held on campus that night.

Bush High School

Commencement at 11 a.m.
No Project Graduation is planned this year.

Elkins High School

Commencement at 1:30 p.m.
Project Graduation to be held on campus that night.

Hightower High School

Commencement at 4 p.m.
Project Graduation to be held at Dave and Buster's that night.

Marshall High School

Commencement at 6:30 p.m.
Project Graduation to be held at Incredible Pizza on Hwy. 6 that night.

The Big Night

The night of graduation. most Pro Grad events require the students to check in by a certain time. About an hour after check-in, the doors are locked and students stay the night at the facility. Throughout the evening, graduates can cruise through different rooms to enjoy different activities. This year, Elkins High School will have a Velcro wall, sumo wrestling events, a mechanical bull, casino games, and a hypnotist. Other schools offer similar events like foosball, magicians, and volleyball games. "Seniors really will not want to miss this event because there will be activities that appeal to everyone," says Rose Davis with Clements High School Pro Grad.

In addition to the fun and free food, graduates rarely leave the next morning empty handed. Organizers use the money they generated throughout the school year to purchase prizes such as laptops, printers, Wiis, TVs, dorm-sized refrigerators, and more. Almost all the schools work toward giving every senior who attends Pro Grad some kind of gift card. No matter what students walk away with at the end of Pro Grad, the ultimate goal is for them to walk away.

Party with a Purpose

"MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) wants the public to stop acting like underage drinking isn't a serious problem and support alcohol prevention programs in their communities," says Rangel. "We want students to have a great time in high school, but we want them to leave alcohol and other drugs out of their celebrations and live to remember all of it." SLM

JENNIFER HEATH is a freelance writer. She's a mother to her son, Landry, and baby-to-be in August.

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-Hope Rangel, MADD



Auctions and Raffles are a popular way to raise money



Austin High School students participated in a style show

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