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Wheeler High senior exemplifies community involvement, overcoming obstacles



Then Wheeler High School senior Hayden Leach poses for a portrait Wednesday, June 2, 2021, at the school in North Stonington. (Sarah Gordon/The Day)

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Melina Khan, Special to The Day

North Stonington — Wearing a baseball cap, Carhartt hoodie and threadbare white pants, Hayden Leach unclipped a handheld Motorola pager from his belt.

"It's 365, 24/7, whenever we get a call," he explained.

The recent Wheeler High School graduate has been a member of North Stonington's Volunteer Fire Department since he was 16.

Formerly of Montville, he would have had to wait until he turned 18 and underwent training to become a firefighter there. When his family moved to North Stonington during his middle school years, he knew he wanted to get involved with his community.

"I've always grown up trying to help as much as I can ... so I joined (the fire department) as soon as I could," he said.

For Leach, helping as much as he can extends to anywhere that he can use his hands. Now that **he's graduated** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20210611/wheeler-class-of-2021-x2018made-lemonade-out-of-lemons2019>), he plans to work as a machine assembler for US Extruders in Westerly before pursuing a degree as an electrical technician. He hopes to eventually become a high-voltage lineman.

Exploring options for life post-graduation was eye-opening for Leach, as he realized the many paths he could take. Some of these paths included enlisting in the military, becoming a full-time member of the fire department or becoming a police officer.

"I was mostly thinking, college is the only way I can go, and it's not," Leach said. "There's a lot of really good jobs and opportunities — you don't have to go sit in a classroom after (graduating)."

His work as a volunteer firefighter has helped prepare him for his new career. Though he is only a junior member, he has grown since joining the fire department, now being able to respond to calls on his own.

Sometimes, he has even left school mid-day to respond to an emergency call. He said administration was understanding of his role and allowed him to respond to a call during school hours as long as he maintained good academic standing.

Wheeler Principal Kristen St. Germain spoke highly of Leach, describing him as "wise beyond his years." She said she is looking forward to seeing what he accomplishes in the future.

"I can't say enough kind words about this young man," St. Germain said. "... He's always made the best out of everything."

Graduation is not only a proud accomplishment, but a goal fulfilled for Leach. When his father unexpectedly passed away last year, it was a turning point in Leach's high school career. He pointed to his hopes of graduating on time, something he was unsure of before due to low grades in his first two years.

"Junior and senior year I brought my grades up, started paying attention and actually tried to be a better student and classmate," Leach said.

He credited his mother as a "major influence" on him after his father's death, pushing him to stay on top of his studies and work toward graduation. He also attributed inspiration to seeing his two older sisters graduate high school with strong grades.

Through the grief of his father's loss, Leach said he became motivated to be "the best I could, and don't take life for granted at all."

Leach admitted to being surprised at being chosen to be profiled. He recalled his initial reaction as thinking his name was mistaken for one of his classmates, who he called "stellar people."

Citing his proudest accomplishment as his attitude shift between the first and second halves of high school, Leach said he would wake up excited each day to go to school. He said he will miss interacting with teachers and classmates the most.

"I remember getting my key card and seeing 2021, and it blew my mind," Leach said. "I never thought it would come as soon as it did."

STORIES THAT MAY INTEREST YOU

Ledyard voters approve school roofing projects (</local-news/20220223/ledyard-voters-approve-school-roofing-projects>)

As heavy rain fell during the late afternoon and evening, Ledyard voters Tuesday approved a \$6.725 million bond to replace leaking roofs at the Juliet W. Long and Gales Ferry Elementary Schools.



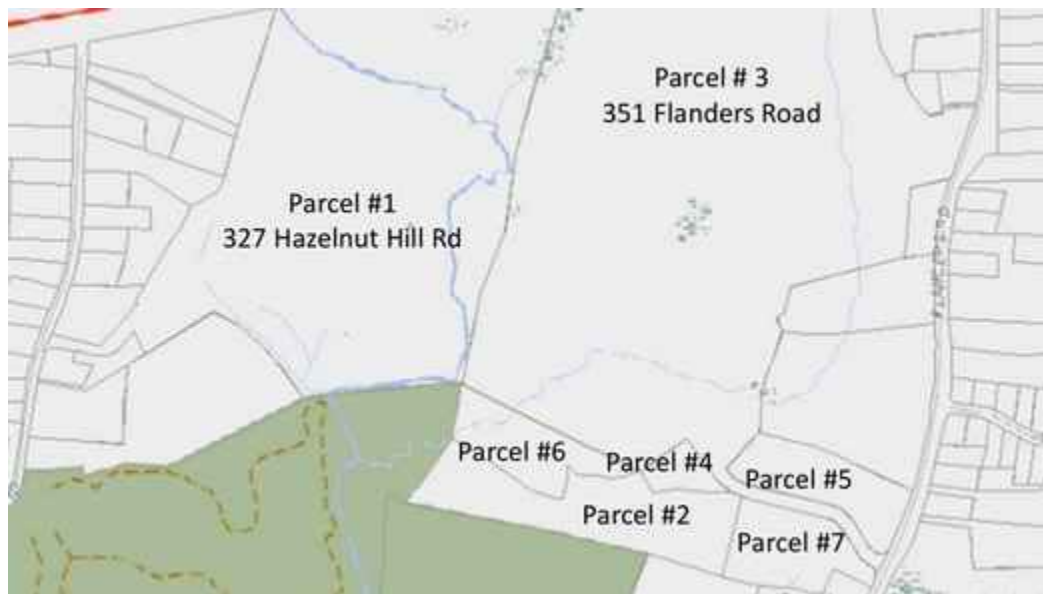
Dancing your way to love during the bleak midwinter (</local-news/20220223/dancing-your-way-to-love-during-bleak-midwinter>)

Imagine, before the COVID vaccines were developed, people were afraid to be near others or shake hands — never mind kiss. While some people still feel that way, some are venturing out to socialize and date.



History Revisited: Case closed on alleged murder by poison (</local-news/20220223/history-revisited-case-closed-on-alleged-murder-by-poison>)

This is the third of a three-part series.



Data center agreement proposed for land south of I-95 in Groton (</local-news/20220222/data-center-agreement-proposed-for-land-south-of-i-95-in-groton>)

A proposed data center agreement for land south of Interstate 95 between Hazelnut Hill and Flanders Roads will be presented to the public on Thursday.