

HOLDEN HIGH / ORINDA ACADEMY

Graduates Overcome Many Obstacles to Launch New Lives

By EMILY WITT
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Graduation has passed for students at most of Orinda's schools. While many graduates received their "sheepskin" at public schools, students from private schools, such as Holden High School, also walked to the podium to receive their degrees. Some never assumed they would get there. One is **Kaitlin Morse**.

Morse was radiant recently as she talked of the sense of direction and meaning in her life that she had gained largely through the medium of theater at Holden. With the support and acceptance she felt from other students, faculty, and staff, she emerged from a disabling depression to move beyond feelings of self-judgment and rejection from others.

"When I came to Holden at the age of 14, I was pretty unhappy. At the public high school that I had attended, I was having a difficult time due to personal issues with my family. My grades reflected this challenge. Rather than getting support, one of my teachers pulled me aside and sternly said, 'You are fooling around too much. You need to work harder.'"

With the presumption of truancy by her

teacher and challenges at home, Morse's inability to focus was exacerbated. She fell behind academically, and finally dropped out of school. Determined to finish high school, however, she found Holden High School by using the Google search engine on the web and entering the keywords "alternative schools and Contra Costa County."

At Holden, Morse was allowed the time and space to "do the soul searching I needed to do," she said. "I let go of a lot of hang-ups about how I felt about myself and about how I thought other people saw me." Citing the respect the teachers gave her and acceptance by her peers, she expressed gratitude for the support. She felt the faculty and staff demonstrated that they really cared about her.

Morse has now finished high school a year early because she chose to take more units per semester, which is an option at Holden. She completed her senior project by joining a group of professional actors in San Francisco at the Dickens' Christmas Faire, performing in period costume with the troupe. An oral and written presentation about this experience to her classmates completed the final graduation requirement. She is now intent on enrolling



Holden graduating seniors (back row L-R) **Chelsea Rochon**, **Aly Akridge-Foy**, (front row L-R) **Kaitlyn Morse**, **Natalie Ferguson**. SALLY HOGARTY

in a drama program to begin her professional studies.

Like Kaitin, **Chelsea Rochon** has graduated early from Holden High School. For her, middle school was an unfriendly place where she felt targeted. Her style of dress prejudiced other students and adults there. "They treated me like I was a bad kid," she said. She also had trouble focusing because of learning challenges. By the time

she began as a student at Holden High School, she was "depressed, confused about my identity, and behind my peers academically," she said.

Again, she cited "acceptance for who I was and am" as a major reason for her academic and spiritual rebirth at Holden High School. In order to graduate a year early, Chelsea chose to take more classes

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each semester. She attributed her drive and motivation to complete school early to the fact that at Holden, "teachers took the time to understand my learning style and my personality, teaching in a way that worked for me." Though Chelsea is still exploring what she wants to do after graduating, she has regained her confidence and belief in herself. Her senior project is a handmade book of her photos, paintings, and drawings – the beginning of a professional portfolio. Her fellow classmates say it is remarkable.

Aly Akridge-Foy previously attended public middle school in Pleasant Hill. She fell behind because of personal challenges, arriving at Holden at the age of 13. She describes her fellow Holden High students as "brilliant – highly intelligent." She said, "They, as well as the staff and faculty, always continued believing in me and pushed me to be my best."

Encouraged by Holden's teachers, Akridge-Foy developed an interest in language, especially its various origins throughout history. Not only does she want to study different languages now, she took the time to learn American sign language (ASL) while a Holden student, with the immersion approach taught by two deaf instructors at Diablo Valley College. There, her mother joined her for one of her two semesters to learn ASL. Now they both are able to more fully understand a family member who uses sign language to communicate.

In wondering how we came to use the phrase, "close but no cigar," Akridge-Foy researched it and narrowed down the topic for her senior project: the History of Clichés. Derived from usage by slot machine players a long time ago, "close but no cigar" was the pronouncement when a player did not win. When they won a round at the "slots," a cigar was the reward.

Natalie Ferguson, another graduate,

said, "Holden High School grounded me. I felt liked and accepted. Where I went to school previously, it felt like teachers did not believe in me because I did not get good grades."

This sentiment echoes what Morse felt about her public school experience, as well. At Holden High, the instructors gave Ferguson the support she needed. She felt they knew her as an individual, "not as a name on a roster." Previous to her experience at Holden High, she said, "none of my teachers liked me. The culture at Holden, in contrast, is a positive one where no one is stereotyped or rejected."

For Ferguson, snowboarding has been a source of satisfaction and fun, as well as an opportunity to develop mastery since seventh grade. She has lived part of each year at Lake Tahoe, so developing a winter snow-based sport made sense. She decided to complete her senior project by teaching this sport and skill in the snow country over the period of two weekends. She asked two of her good friends and fellow Holden students (both raised in urban Oakland) to allow her to teach them how to snowboard. Neither had ever seen snow firsthand, nor been to the High Sierra mountains in the winter. Ferguson's project not only demonstrated her ability to teach but provided the opportunity for two other students to grow, as well. By their second set of lessons after two weekends in the snow, both students were snowboarding and having fun learning together. Back at school, Ferguson did an oral presentation and written paper about teaching snowboarding. Now empassioned to learn how to teach, she is considering enrolling in a teaching credential program in college.

All four students showed a sense of pride in themselves and discovered areas of interest in their lives that may launch them into fulfilling professional careers. Each, like their fellow graduates, received their degrees with pride.