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Making the grade as an Evergreen Park Hall of Famer — and finding inspiration in the class of 2026

Fifty-nine years after graduating from Evergreen Park Community High School, a local author returns for a hall of fame induction and finds himself humbled by the bright, young minds surrounding him on honors night.

By David McGrath May 30, 2026, 7:00am EDT



Local author and professor emeritus David McGrath recently entered Evergreen Park Community High School's Hall of Fame. Courtesy of Tim Moran/Evergreen Park Community H.S.

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A co-worker once told me they envied how I ambled through the building in a way that indicates zero stress.

What they were witnessing, I said, was my habit of hiding what's really going on under all that gray hair, because I am, in fact, a worrier.

Which is why when Evergreen Park Community High School, from which I graduated in 1967, informed me of my selection for their [hall of fame](#), I was elated and honored, but not for very long.

For later that night, as I closed my eyes in hopes of the usual six hours of sleep, shadowy thoughts began to seep into my skull: Will there be a final screening? A vetting process before they make it official?

Commentary

It's school, after all, with a principal and attendance officers, and, somewhere in a safe room or a vault, my "permanent record." Doubtless, it will show the hall of fame committee the number of my after-school detentions. And how many times I cut Mr. Noethe's chemistry class.

And wouldn't video be unearthed of Gerald Topel and me smoking Marlboros behind the bank across the street, betraying English teacher Dorothy Strang's trust in us to be working diligently on our [Marshall McLuhan](#) project in the library? And if anyone scoffs at the odds that there would be video surveillance from 1967, they need to remember that it was a bank we were crouching behind.

But to paraphrase the late Tom Petty, most of what I worry about never happens anyway. The Hall of Fame ceremony was simple and humbling, with the rest of the

time on honors night rightfully reserved for outstanding students and their beaming, tearful parents.

On paper, Evergreen Park Community High School is near-perfect. When I graduated 50 years ago, there were approximately 1,300 students, and 99.9% were white. Today, there are 900 students, with roughly a third white, a third African American and a third Hispanic. The graduation rate is 95.5%, and \$21,000 is spent per pupil.

Rising stars from class of 2026

A balanced curriculum of academic and shop classes is offered, and yearlong incentives such as the multiple awards and scholarships presented on honors night, ranging from recognition for musical excellence for Louise Brady and the industrial technology award for James Templin, to the Illini Boys State Evergreen Park American Legion Post No. 854 Citizenship Award for Garret Kazmierowicz and Brendan Joyce, and the senior service award for Kaitlyn Fort.

If you've ever been in the company of a bunch of polite, happy and gifted teenagers, you're already aware of the salubrious effect. It's similar to the sense you get when you're by the ocean: a feeling of peace, wonder and perspective. Scientists call the state of well-being the "blue mind."

The innocent, dressed-for-church seniors representing the best of the class of 2026 smiled placidly as they shook my hand. There was no hint of the anxiety churning

inside me and my contemporaries over war, political strife or a planet showing signs of countless man-made assaults.

Instead, they're smart, tech-savvy kids, well aware of the problems the world is facing, yet exuding quiet confidence in their futures.

Seniors Zachary Barnes, Jade Alfano, Fiona Buchanan and Patrick Moroney were just four of the many seated on the stage for not only having GPAs over 3.75, but for being recognized by the National College Board for sky-high scores on the preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying tests, PSAT 10 and Advanced Placement exams.

Born in 2009, they have never known the world without the internet, and have grown up with smartphones and social media. Their nonchalant mastery of technology that frequently overwhelms me, and their obvious joy on honors night as they giggle and poke each other in controlled excitement, leaves little doubt in my mind that they're up for the challenges facing them.

In fact, their combination of human preciousness and extraordinary competence made me sleep well, my state of "blue mind" lasting through the night and extending into the next day, when my brother asked why I made the hall of fame.

"Sports, of course," I said.

He laughed, reminding me how I was always afraid of the ball. So I told him it was really for writing all those stories about us growing up in E.P.

“But you didn’t always ask permission,” he said.

Which is one of the great things about living in this country. While the greatest may very well be America’s youth.

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at College of DuPage and author of “Far Enough Away,” a collection of Chicago area stories.