

## Abigail Hernandez gets high school diploma in jail

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

By the end of last weekend, nearly all the graduating seniors in Monroe County had sat through their allotment of inspirational speeches, moved the tassels on their cap and received their diplomas.

Only one remained by Monday. Abigail Hernandez, the 21-year-old woman from Mexico being held on charges of making a terroristic threat at East High School, put on a maroon Edison Career and Technology High School cap and gown over her red Monroe County Jail jumpsuit and accepted her Alternate Assessment certificate.

All the trappings of a graduation party were there, modified for the unusual setting. Cameras are forbidden in jail, so there were no celebratory selfies. The cupcakes had to go through the metal detector.

Rita Gaither, Hernandez's teacher and mentor from the Rochester City School District, bought her a coloring book, colored pencils and a pack of Wrestlemania trading cards as gifts.

"As long as they didn't have gum in them, I could bring them in," she said.

Hernandez was a special education student who participated in the Special Olympics and, according to her family, has a developmental disability. She received a non-Regents certificate through the state Alternate Assessment program designed for "students with the most severe disabilities."

Gaither and her RCSD teachers said Hernandez was diligent in completing her work in jail in time for June graduation. She and school board member Beatriz LeBron thought up and organized the graduation event, with the jail in the unusual position of hosting local dignitaries at a party for an inmate.

About 20 people were in attendance, including several deputies who came in on their day off. School Board President Van White, Edison Tech Principal Walter Larkin and Youth and Justice Program Director Michael Allen conducted the ceremony.

"Love is stronger than any indictment," White said. "It's stronger than any misdemeanor or any challenge you can encounter. ... You will see this through."

Hernandez's felony charge stems from a post she allegedly wrote on the East High School Facebook page Feb. 15: "I'm coming tomorrow morning and I'm going to shoot all of ya bitches."

She now has two problems. Even if she can get the terroristic threat charge dropped — she'll be in court Wednesday morning — she still likely faces deportation to Mexico. Hernandez didn't say much at Monday's ceremony. When she began to cry — for instance, when a congratulatory letter from Mayor Lovely Warren was read — she reached for the hand of Steven King, a resource officer at Edison Tech who became her mentor at the school.

"Since she came over from East she was pretty much always at my hip," he said. "She's a wonderful young lady. I love her to death and I miss her."

She had supporters outside the jail as well. Gaither said Hernandez has a stack of letters she's received from detainees at the Buffalo Federal Detention Facility in Batavia, where she was briefly held.

"She read me several of their letters. They think of (her) as a hero and spokesperson for those who are being imprisoned and forgotten by the world," Gaither wrote in an email.

After the ceremony had ended, Hernandez tried to get bites of a cupcake in between hugs from well-wishers. She leafed through an Edison Tech yearbook in which her classmates had written messages and collected her graduation greeting cards.

She couldn't bring her framed certificate back to her cell, so she gave it to someone to bring to her mother.

"This will pass," King told her. "When you first started here, you thought you were alone, didn't you? Well, you're not."

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**Abigail Hernandez is being held on charges of making a terroristic threat at East High School. POOL PHOTO/WHEC-TV**



**Program for the graduation ceremony Hernandez had at Monroe County Jail on Monday. CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ\_DANDC/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**