

June 14, 2007

# WESTWORD

## WEB EXCLUSIVES

# Valedictorian Yoo cites balance and hard work as keys to success

**W** Ian Simon  
Graphics and Photography Editor



Senior Brian Yoo delivers the valedictory speech at West's commencement on May 31. Photo courtesy Jim Szczepaniak

The senior who danced "The Robot" and moonwalked like Michael Jackson across the Robert L. Johnson Auditorium stage last month at the annual Accolades ceremony, Brian Yoo of Lincolnwood recently was named Class of 2007 valedictorian.

Yoo attended Niles West for four years and delivered the valedictory speech at the May 31 commencement.

So, who is the man behind the antics, the grades and the speech?

"Basically, I feel that in life, you have to give it your all," Yoo told *West Word*.

Yoo obviously follows his own advice. During his tenure at West, Yoo did not receive a grade lower than "A" and was thoroughly involved in a variety of extracurricular activities, including participating on the WYSE, math, golf, track, cross country and Poetry Slam teams, and he was a charter member of the legendary Breakfast Club.

In addition to all of his activities and schoolwork, Brian also took part in volunteer work in Chicago with senior citizens.

The plethora of "A" grades and the preponderance of Advanced Placement (AP) courses in his schedule allowed Yoo to edge salutatorian Amin Lakhani for the top spot.

"After a certain point, I took responsibility for my own grades, and worked towards this myself," said Yoo.

Yoo describes his commitment to all that West has to offer as a sort of "balancing act" of classes, activities and social commitments.

"I have found that, throughout the years, I have studied [at night] less and less and have been finding ways to fit my homework in during school," said Yoo.

Not surprisingly, Yoo proved to be adept at standardized testing as well, garnering 2330/2400 on the SAT and receiving a score of 35/36 on the ACT.

Yoo also took the preliminary exam for the United States physics team. In this competition, the top 200 scorers are considered semifinalists, and they take a test after that to narrow it down to the finalists.

"Miraculously, I scored as a semifinalist for the physics exam," Yoo explained.

Yoo credits his physics teacher for his accomplishments in the subject.

"[Science teacher Martha] Lietz has interested me in physics. I had her my junior and senior year, and without her I wouldn't have been able to do some of the things I have done this year," Yoo said.

In addition to Lietz, Yoo credits a number of other teachers for their contributions to his success.

"To name just a few, I would like to thank [English teacher David] Klingenberger, [Social Studies teacher Joseph] Meyer and [Mathematics teacher Matthew] Fahrenbacher who was my structured programming and computer science teacher. [English Teacher Wileen] Hsing was one of the most positive influences, and she also started me in slam poetry."

Yoo added, "More or less, all the teachers from the last four years in high school have been great influences, and I thank them all [for that]."

Although Yoo took several AP classes and admits that his goal for the most part was to keep his grades up, he feels that one must have a good time in high school to get the most out of it. For example, in his sophomore year, he was interested in computer science and classes in that category, so he decided to take structured programming.

"Structured programming wasn't necessarily an AP class; it was an honors class. It was just what I was interested in, and you just have to take the classes that interest you," he added.

Yoo first realized that he was a possible valedictorian candidate during the second semester of junior year, when he was ranked first in his class.

Yoo said that although he was ranked one, he did not become obsessed with becoming the valedictorian. He maintained his normal routine of studying, homework and activities and was pleasantly surprised that this routine had put him at the top of his class.

"It was never about being ranked number one, but instead about doing the best I could do. Pushing myself has been the main source of motivation," said Yoo.

In fact, Yoo said that from after finishing high school and looking back at it, grades "weren't a huge deal" to him, and that extracurricular activities were where he put the majority of his time.

"In the end it [all] really is just numbers. What is more important is being satisfied with your four years of high school. You don't have to be [ranked] number one or number two to be satisfied."

Yoo feels that his work ethic and sense of balance will serve him well this fall, when he begins his collegiate studies at Stanford University.