

I would like to acknowledge that we live, learn, and play on unceded Secwépemc territory. Welcome all grandmas, grandpas, aunties, cousins, and everyone who has been involved in supporting our graduation class of 2026!

My name is Rihanna Rain Billyboy. I am from Tsilhqot'in Nation. My mother is Florinne Ann Billyboy, my grandmother is Dorothy Billyboy, my aunty is Marilyn Billyboy, and my grandfather is Jack Billyboy. We are all Chilcotin.

I would also like to extend a gracious welcome to all graduating students and a shoutout to those in the crowd who stand with us tonight as we celebrate our final completion to our last days of the school year. To all teachers, parents, relatives, friends, and fellow guests, thank you for being here.

As I stand on this stage to give a final goodbye as this year's valedictorian, I would like to add that this night may be a night of sorrow yet also one of great joy and cheer! We all went through so much during our high school years; everyone here has different stories that will never be the same as any other. Paths that would be full of struggles, pain, and discouragement while also experiencing happiness alongside companionship. We all had our lowest points and our highest joys, yet despite our long journey, we are standing here together.

When I look back on my own journey to get here on this stage, I definitely did not have an easy start. I faced struggles that many of you might recognize. As I speak, some of you might notice that you were not as alone as you thought and may have been in the same boat as me. I was bullied, judged unfairly, grew up without the resources I needed, and felt entirely different from everyone around me. I faced many moments of self-doubt, severe burnout, and personal battles outside my school life. There was a time that I once relied on harmful things just to get through an entire day, even though I could feel my health and mindset declining. I lacked motivation, and it got to the point it felt like help was not a privilege for me. But our stories should not stop at our struggles so mine kept going until I finally redeemed myself – not for my own reasons but to inspire awe and pride for my people.

My growth came when I started to find myself in my culture, attending sacred ceremonies, and talking to elders. I found strength in my friends and in the teachers who refused to give up on me. I have learned to shift my focus to find my motivation in science and art. I kept pushing myself until I made it onto the Honor Roll and Principal's List. Most importantly, I changed from within to achieve my own freedom. I refused to feel confined by the many labels that were placed on me.

I was no longer Rihanna; my name is now Rain. Rain who is an honorable student, a respected peer, and a voice to be heard.

It finally felt like I was living for myself. My motivation to prove those labels wrong and to create real change for the people around me became my new resolution. I wanted to prove my band assumptions wrong, to show that off-reserve youth like me can thrive with or without

their help. I wanted to prove to everyone who forced me to feel like I was not enough, that I can absolutely succeed.

I am standing here today as one of the many Native youth in becoming someone to be remembered, respected, and someone to look up to when searching for hope. After I leave NorKam to attend TRU and study Criminology, I will remember that I will not be alone. I will continue pushing forward the message that we are showing the world tonight. That we, as Native youths, are still here, still heard, and are as successful as we choose to be.

Of course, I did not get on this stage entirely on my own. I would like to say a few names of the people who helped me become who I am today. To keep it fair, I will keep it to a minimum of only saying their names but those I call out, you know why I am honoring your name up here:

Sandra Steele, Miss Linder, Mr. Walton, Margaret Anderson, Sandie Phillips, Mike Archie, Breanne Kerr, Dorian, Brittany, Zoey, Dez, Joanna, all the youth workers at BGC, Rhiannon, Sadie L, Sadie G, Elizak, Justin, Cady, Jasmineen, and Jessica.

As I stand on this stage, I look upon all of you and I do not just see graduating youths, instead, I see future artists, scientists, tradespeople, nurses, and leaders. We are an entirely new generation of workers who are going to do great things out there. No matter where we end up, may Kamloops always hold a special place in our hearts moving forward.

May everyone have a great celebration Nanexwenuwes?in (I will see you all again)
Sechanalyagh (Thank you).