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Graduation ceremonies of eighth-graders from Feltonville Arts & Sciences School last Thursday. The ceremony was marred by a fight between two women.

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Ronnie Polaneczky: Students save graduation day at Feltonville Arts & Sciences graduation



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WHEN I HEARD what went down at Feltonville Arts & Sciences' eighth-grade graduation on Thursday, I felt both angry and hopeful.

Angry because, for heaven's sake, two women in the audience got into a fistfight during the ceremony at the middle school on East Courtland Street.

We're talking the kind of hair-pulling punch-down in which the combatants - one of them was even *pregnant* - actually kicked off their shoes so footwear wouldn't slow their assault.

Oh, lovely.

But I'm also hopeful because of the stunning way the graduates handled the violent intrusion on their rite of passage.

Suffice to say that these wonderful kids had the last word, leaving no doubt about their readiness to assume the more adult world of high school.

And they totally schooled adults who need to grow up.

Elvis Rosado was there for the whole thing, so I'll let him share his impressions of what happened. But first let me tell you about Elvis.

He's a prevention specialist with CADEKids, a well-regarded behavior-development organization that helps children make good decisions by teaching them how to control their impulses and avoid conflict, violence and drugs.

For the last two years, Rosado has spent one day a week at Feltonville, one of 25 schools where 7,200 students receive CADEKids' instruction in social-emotional learning.

"The children really relate to Elvis," says Feltonville social-studies and language-arts teacher Candice Baez. She helped organize the graduation for the eighth-graders, who had worked closely with Rosado last year.

"His program has had a very good impact on them. There have been changes in behaviors and attitudes," Baez said. "That's why we asked him to speak at graduation. We love Elvy."

The outdoor ceremony was packed, which you'd expect for a class of about 280 graduates, and seating was tight.

But many parents with seats refused to stay in them as commencement progressed. Despite continued pleas from the podium by Rosado and others, the adults jammed the walkways and disrupted the speeches to blab, take photos and basically block the view of those with enough manners to stay seated.

"No matter how many times we asked them to clear the aisles, they were noncompliant," says Rosado. "Even the children were getting frustrated. They were yelling at the adults, '*Do you not understand? What are you doing?*' It was so weird to see the kids act like parents, instead of the parents being parents."

Then came - sigh - that fistfight, which broke out over an empty chair that a woman wanted to use while its owner was flitting about. When the friend "holding" the chair for the flitterer refused to allow the woman to temporarily use it, hell ensued.

"They were cursing and punching each other," says one graduate's mother, who sat in front of the two warring women (and who doesn't want her name used, for fear of reprisal).

"This was right in the middle of graduation! They were swinging their arms, and they didn't care who they hit. I had to move my kids out of the way because I was afraid they'd get hurt."

Now at this point, no one would've been surprised - saddened, but not surprised - if the grads had fled the bleachers to watch the brouhaha, the way many kids watch when a fight breaks out. The way that many adults in the audience were already doing. The way that escalates violence instead of calming it.

Instead, while school administrators called 9-1-1, the kids did something so unexpected, so perfect, it gives me goose bumps.

They broke into song.

Specifically, they sang "*La Tierra de Borinquen*," the Puerto Rican national anthem. It's one of four national anthems (including America's) they'd sung at the beginning of the ceremony, after reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, in recognition of the school's rich diversity.

When the fight broke out, Baez had frantically hit the "play" button on the recorded background music of the song, hoping it might calm the tension. What she never imagined was that the children would jump in and begin singing it again.

But they did. And with each sweetly warbled line, badly behaving adults appeared to remember that this day was supposed to be about the kids, not them. By the time police arrived, the vibe had calmed enough for the ceremony to continue without additional interruption.

"It was one of those warm and fuzzy moments where you can't believe what just happened," says Rosado. "I was so incredibly impressed and encouraged. I kept saying to the gentleman next to me, 'Isn't this amazing?' "

Dianne Reed, executive director of CADEKids, notes that Feltonville is a feeder school to Olney High - one of the state's persistently dangerous schools.

Overwhelmingly, students attending Olney come from ZIP codes like Feltonville's (19120), neighborhoods that are scarred by poverty and violence, and they bring the fallout of those stressors to school with them.

The only lasting way to change a persistently violent school is to change the behavior of the children within it.

Last week, the graduates of Feltonville showed a level of restraint that will only help them in difficult circumstances, no matter where they attend high school this fall.

"For kids from such a stressed area to have so much poise and so much soul, it makes me teary," says Reed. "It makes me feel hopeful."

Me, too. Because last week, while ignorance intruded on Feltonville's graduation, hope carried the day.

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