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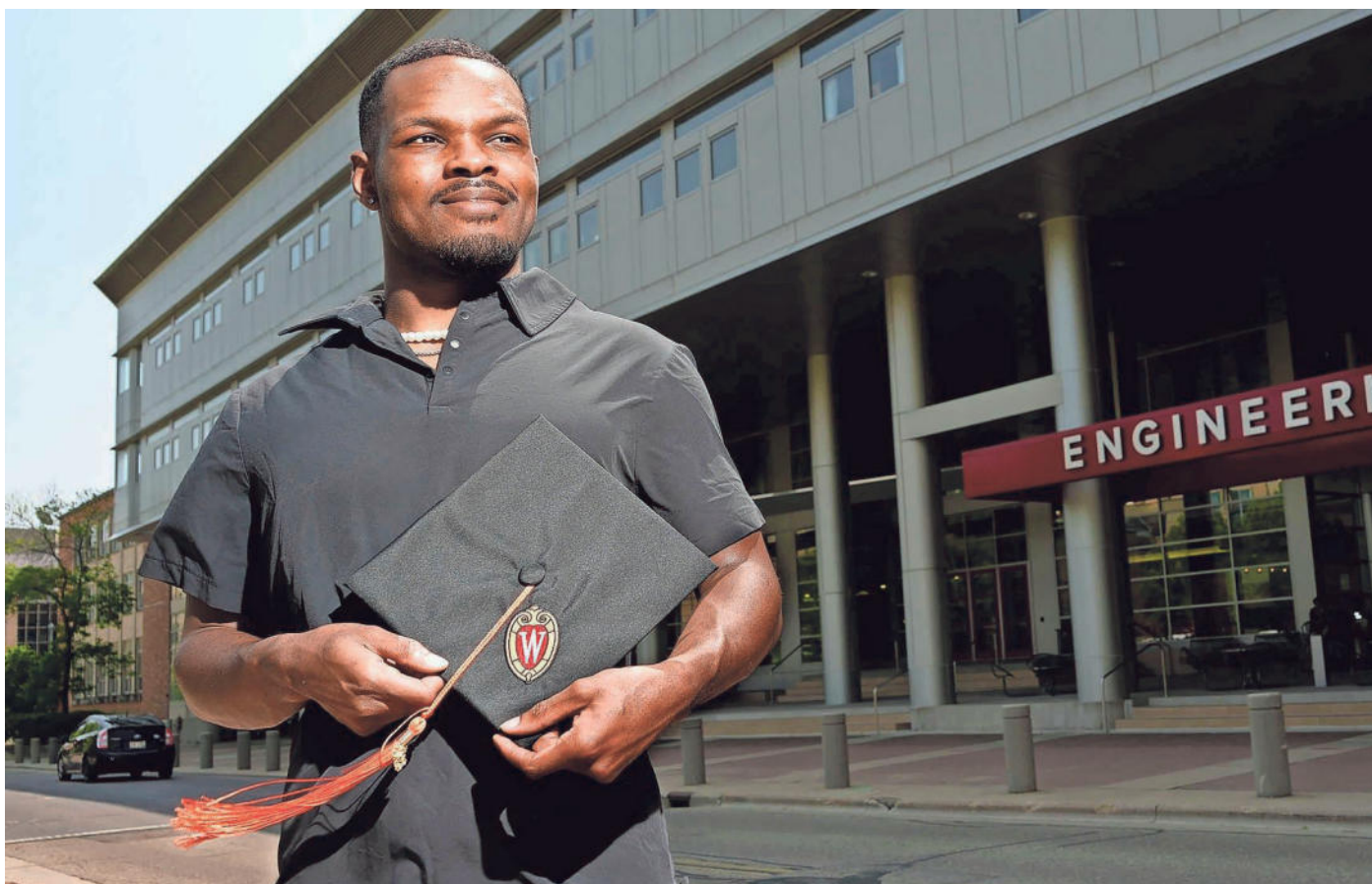
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CLASS OF 2023

# A GRUELING FOUR YEARS

STUDENTS REFLECT ON PANDEMIC, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND MORE



Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

**T**hey were freshmen in high school and college trying to figure out how the world worked, when suddenly the world stopped working. • COVID-19 was a generation-defining disaster. Schools shut down. Lives were lost. Learning was, too. College students traded their dorm rooms for doomscrolling, their socializing at parties for social distancing. High schoolers were reduced to suffocating squares on Zoom; college students dealt with professors they never met. • They came of age during a pandemic panic, racial injustice protests and mental health challenges. What was supposed to be one of the most social times in their lives was instead one of the loneliest. • Now they're seniors, from high schools and colleges across the state. Here are stories from six seniors in the class of 2023, some of whom made it to the stage for their diplomas and others who are searching for their next step.

### Isaac Wells-Cage, 21, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The University of Wisconsin-Madison emptied its dorms in March 2020, instructing students to hunker down at home.

Freshman Isaac Wells-Cage didn't have a home to go to. His mom was in the hospital, his dad was out of the picture, so he shared an apartment with a friend.

While in some ways, his pandemic experience was similar to classmates — he listened to lectures from bed and had swabs stuck up his nose for required COVID testing — he weathered things differently because of all he had already been through.

"Those experiences, they're definitely monumental and they matter," Wells-Cage said. "But in comparison to what I've experienced in life, it's just, like, another day."

See **STUDENTS**, Page 4A

Isaac Wells-Cage earned an industrial and systems engineering degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in May. The odds of him graduating with a college degree were stacked from the start, even before the pandemic hit.

MIKE DE SISTI / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

## County Board censures member over transphobic comments

Sophia Voight  
Appleton Post-Crescent  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

APPLETON - After a string of protests and community pushback to transphobic comments made by Outagamie County Board member Timothy Hermes, the board voted Tuesday evening to file a censure, condemning the board member's comments.

"There is no place for hate speech like we heard in Outagamie County, especially by a county supervisor during the board meeting," said board member Joe Santonato, who voted for the censure.

The vote resulted in an eruption of cheers from the public, including many who have been protesting Hermes since he made the comments and called for disciplinary action against the board member. The board voted 21-8 to file a censure, with board members Justin Krueger, Chad Cooke, Ronald Klemp, Sarah Weinberg, Jayson Winterfeldt,

See **TRANSPHOBIC**, Page 2A

## Grand Chute reconsiders firing March, but makes no change

Duke Behnke  
Appleton Post-Crescent  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

GRAND CHUTE - A motion to rehire former Town Administrator Jim March failed to pass Tuesday on a 2-3 vote.

Instead, the Town Board emerged from a closed session and voted 3-2 to contract with Public Administration Associates of West Bend to provide interim town administrator services.

The services will be fulfilled by Jeff O'Dell at \$95 an hour, plus hotel expenses. He will work three days a week.

The board also voted 5-0 to hire Public Administration Associates to recruit a new town administrator. That contract totals \$18,600.

The Town Board fired March without cause on May 2 after meeting in closed session. Town Chair Jason Van Eperen and supervisors Beth English, Jeff Ings and Ron Wolff voted for the termination. Supervisor Brad Gehring opposed it.

See **MARCH**, Page 3A

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# Transphobic

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Daniel Nejedlo, Dennis Clegg and Daniel Rettler voting against the censure. Absent board members were Michael Smith, Lee Hammen, Cathy Spears, Christine Lamers, Joy Hagen and Jeremy Thyssen.

As a Pride flag flew outside the county government center, dozens of trans-rights activists, religious leaders and LGBTQ+ people packed into the boardroom and the hallway supporting the censure, saying Hermes' anti-trans comments proliferate violence against transgender people and should be condemned by the board.

An equal number of people came out to oppose the censure with many dispensing anti-trans rhetoric equating them with "mentally-ill people" and "perverts." Hermes clapped after each one of these people spoke.



**Outagamie County Board member Timothy Hermes listens to transgender rights activists and citizen disrupt a board meeting May 23 at the Outagamie County Government Center in Appleton.**

DAN POWERS/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

## What were Hermes' transphobic comments?

During the May 9 County Board meeting, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Officer Major Cooper gave a presentation to the board on the importance of equity in the workplace and appreciating the diversity of co-workers.

Following the presentation, board members were able to ask questions, to which Hermes asked Cooper how he can justify "that any man can be a woman," claiming without evidence that men are dressing up as women so they can go into bathrooms or changing rooms with young girls.

His comments about trans people came unprompted as the EDI officer did not talk about transgender individuals or their bathroom use during his presentation.

Hermes' claim that faux trans people are using bathrooms to watch children is unfounded. The National Center for Transgender Equality, the Human Rights Campaign and the American Civil Liberties Union all say there is no statistical evidence that people are dressing as the opposite gender to sneak into bathrooms.

The board member reiterated this unfounded claim at the June 6 meeting, stating again that he finds trans people going into bathrooms that align with their gender "disgusting."

The Post-Crescent is not printing full quotes from Hermes, as sharing transphobic comments proliferates anti-trans rhetoric during a time of unparalleled anti-LGBTQ legislation introduction across the nation.

Hermes was elected to the board in 2022 to represent District 14, which covers the western half of Little Chute.

## What is censure?

A censure is a formal statement of disapproval. This resolution does not act as disciplinary action against Hermes. Instead, it is simply a statement from a majority of board members stating they disagree with the comments made by the board member.

The resolution states: "The Outagamie County Board finds the conduct of Supervisor Hermes to be damaging to the good reputation of Outagamie County, to be disrespectful and insensitive to members of our community, and to be inconsistent with the mission, vision and core values of Outagamie County, its employees, officers and the majority of the County Board of Supervisors."

At the previous board meeting, Corporation Counsel Kyle Sargent told the board the county can't take disciplinary action against Hermes as his comments didn't reach the state law's definition of insufficiency of office or official misconduct that would allow the county to take action.

After learning no disciplinary action could be taken, board member Steve Thiede brought forth the resolution to censure his fellow board member.

In addition to the censure, board Chair Jeff Nooyen said he is going to ask committee chairs to draft a code of conduct outlining proper procedures for county

board members so comments like Hermes' aren't made in the future.

## 'There is a pattern of behavior'

Board Chair Jeff Nooyen said he was adamant about censuring Hermes, telling the board Hermes' comments at the May 9 meeting were not a singular occurrence, but instead one instance in a pattern of "negative and disrespectful and offensive behavior."

Nooyen said Hermes badgered Milwaukee County Board Chair Marcelia Nicholson — a Black Latina woman — during an equity, diversity and inclusion presentation at a Wisconsin Counties Association presentation in August.

Board members Debbie Vander Heiden and Dan Gabrielson who attended that presentation corroborated Nooyen's remarks.

"In what should have been a casual presentation about diversity and communities throughout the state quickly turned into shouting at the presenter and swearing and door slamming," Gabrielson said.

Hermes told the board, "I told [the presenter] what I thought and I did leave."

The eight board members who voted against the censure cited freedom of speech, saying Hermes should be able to share his thoughts without being reprimanded.

"I'm not going to defend his comments, but I am going to defend his right to make them," Cooke said.

Board member Debbie Vander Heiden, who voted for the censure, said she agrees that Hermes has freedom of speech but that shouldn't protect offensive language from being censored.

"When it's prejudice against another person or a human being, that's when it becomes a concern," she said.

## Weeks of protest lead to censure

Since the May 9 meeting when Hermes made his comments, activists from Freedom Road Socialist Organization, ESTHER, Appleton Students for a Democratic Society, as well as LGBTQ citizens have protested outside the county government center and continuously contacted board members calling for increased LGBTQ inclusivity.

Trans-rights activists came out in force at the previous board meeting calling for the resignation of Hermes and showing solidarity with transgender people in the county.

Dismayed by the county's lack of action against Hermes, activists erupted in chants of "trans rights are human rights," disrupting the meeting and pushing the board into nearly an hour-long recess.

Around 50 members of the public came to the June 6 meeting, giving almost two hours of public comments opposing and favoring the censure.

Anti-violence program director for Diverse & Resilient Reiko Ramos came to speak in favor of the censure, saying Hermes' comments incite fear and violence against trans people in the county.

"I have observed time and time again that this type of public discourse that calls into question the validity of LGBTQ people, always causes much harm and further trauma to trans folks," Ramos told the board.

Among those who spoke in opposition was Matthew Trehwella, a Brookfield pastor who has called the murder of an abortion provider "justifiable homicide," advocated for the creation of anti-abortion-focused militia and compared COVID-19 pandemic-related mask mandates to the Holocaust.

The majority of public comments opposing the censure brought forth false information about trans people, claiming they dress a certain way to get into opposite-gendered bathrooms.

The Post-Crescent is not printing these quotes, either.

*Sophia Voight is a local government and political reporter with The Post-Crescent. She can be reached at svoight@postcrescent.com with tips or feedback. Follow her on Twitter @sophia\_voight.*



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The Post-Crescent, USPS# 439-840, is published 6 days per week excluding Saturday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving (observed), Christmas Day (observed) and New Year's Day (observed) by Gannett Media Corp, 222 W. College Ave., 10th floor, P.O. Box 59, Appleton, WI 54911. Periodicals postage paid at Appleton, WI and additional mailing offices. **Postmaster:** Please send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 1387, Fort Smith, AR 72902.