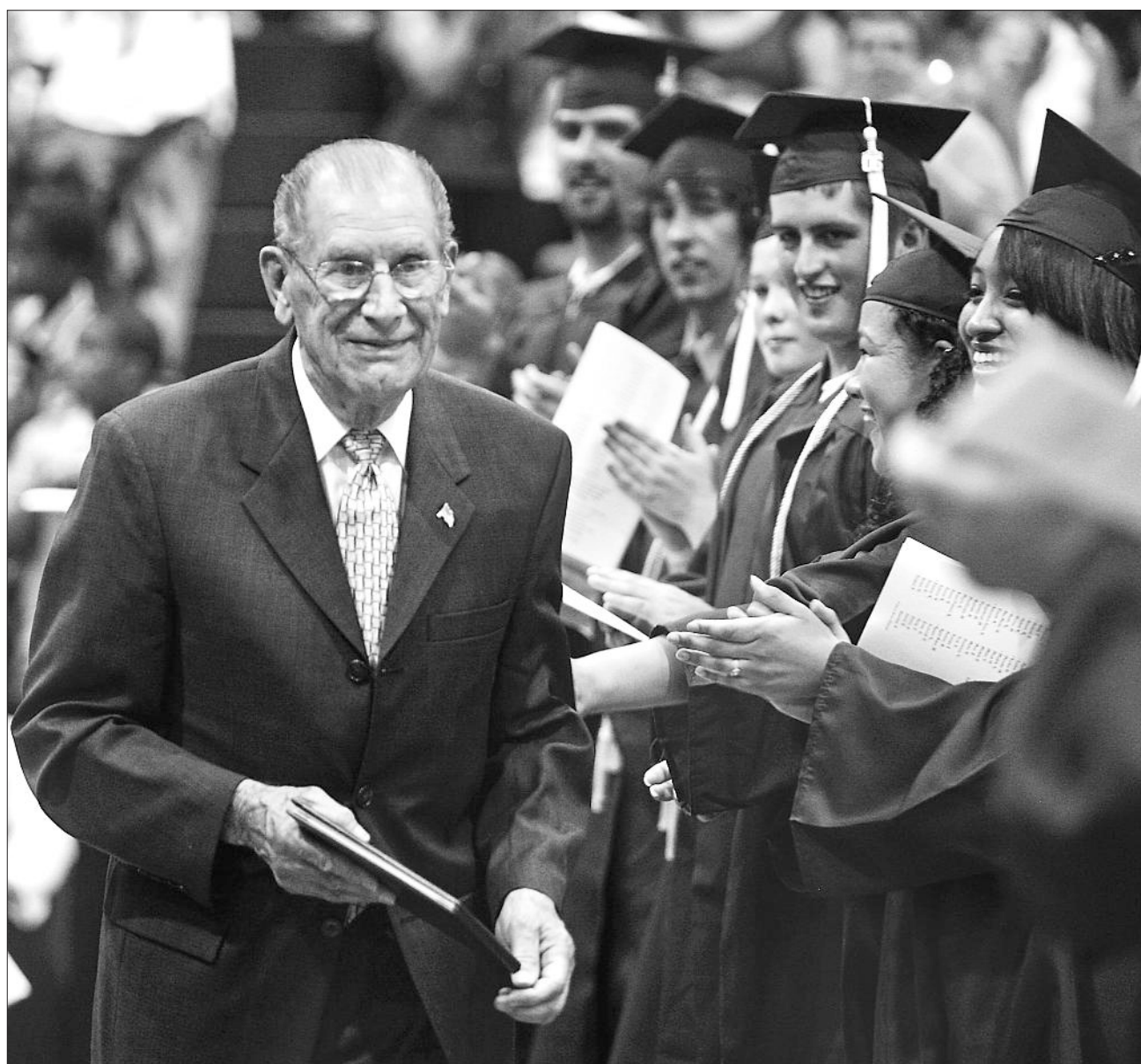


At 84, he's A GRADUATE AT LAST

- An early departure during the Depression left Joseph Kronek without the high school diploma that he thought he had earned.



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Joseph Kronek, 84, went without a cap and gown but graduated nonetheless from Columbia Heights High School on Thursday with the Class of 2006. He discovered in February that he wasn't on record as a graduate of the Class of 1939.

By AISHA EADY
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Joseph Kronek spent the past 65 years believing he graduated from Columbia Heights High School.

Back in 1939, times were tough. Kronek, an orphan since age 14, cad-died at a golf course to support himself, but couldn't afford to pay for a cap and gown for commencement.

Besides, he had to leave school a few weeks early for the Civilian Conservation Corps, a jobs program that helped young men during the Depression.

Before he left, the school's principal assured Kronek he would be recorded as graduated. "Mr. Smith said he would make a record of it and my grades were good enough to graduate," Kronek said.

Time went on. He joined the Army Air Forces, got married and had a daughter, Linda. His eyes brighten and a sly smile crosses his face when he talks about the P-51 Mustangs he flew. Kronek served in Europe during World War II from 1941 to 1945. He later made a career managing commercial paint firms and moved to St. Anthony.

Fast-forward to February 2006. Kronek, now 84, planned to visit long lost cousins in Slovakia. He

needed a passport and two forms of identification with the same spelling of his name, which was misspelled on his birth certificate.

He called Columbia Heights High's guidance secretary, Kathy Garman, for his school records. Garman couldn't find them at first. She was looking in the wrong place.

Garman found his name in the so-called "left school early" section of the records, not in the records of graduates. Garman called Kronek to break the news. "He was just totally surprised," Garman said. "I felt so bad about it; I told him I'd talk to my principal."

Current Principal Matthew Schoen reviewed Kronek's grades and agreed that he had indeed met the requirements to graduate. Schoen wrote a letter to document it, and Garman got to break the good news.

"I said it half-jokingly: 'Since you missed the ceremony in 1939, maybe you'd like to be a part of the ceremony this year,'" Garman said.

Kronek's ordeal is documented in a meticulously kept green vinyl folder: every government office, every contact name, all of his personal documents as well as a black-and-white reunion photo of the Columbia Heights Class of 1939 a few years after the war.

He can name most of his graduating class. He attended most of their

reunions. He points to one young woman in the photograph. "That night, she told me, 'You never graduated because you weren't there at graduation night,'" Kronek said.

That is part of the reason he went to the Columbia Heights High School gym Thursday night. But he also wanted to recognize the help he was given. "I think Kathy and the principal did so much work and backed me so much. I feel it is only fair to do a little bit," Kronek said.

Family and friends of the Class of 2006 saw a ceremony for bright, young graduates led by an old man introduced by Principal Schoen.

"It was a very special feeling to be able to do this for this gentleman," Schoen said. "You don't get the chance to do this every day."

Kronek didn't want to be fussed over. Now that he can afford a cap and gown, he thinks it's unnecessary. "I've had my opportunity; I think it's their day," Kronek said.

His daughter, Linda Kronek Black, saw it as a day for her, too. "He wants me to be proud of him," Black said.

For Kronek, it's a way of setting the record straight. "I was never there for the diploma. I didn't want to be on the record as not graduated."

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