This isn’t the graduation you were expecting.

Your parents, your extended family, your friends and coworkers, we all know this. COVID-19 has disrupted everything, including this rite of passage from high school to college, from college to grad school or work…from student to adult.

And what you are thinking—that it just isn’t fair—is certainly true.

What should have been, hasn’t been. Caps and gowns, huge auditoriums filled with proud family and friends, long boring speeches by adults trying to give meaning to the event. Oh, and the parties. (Those, by the way, are totally the best part.)

But all of those important moments, for the most part, have been squashed by an intangible enemy unlike any your generation has ever experienced. An enemy we didn’t see coming, and one we couldn’t fathom could possibly be this be this bad.

Now the thing about commencement speakers is that they feel the need to give “walking around in a funny hat and wearing a Harry Potter style robe” meaning. They talk about transitions to adulthood; they talk about the process of learning how to be independent; and how to think for yourselves. They often tell stories about their own youth, with witty anecdotes the parents in the audience love, and the kids tolerate.

But this isn’t a normal year. It isn’t a normal graduation. And it certainly isn’t what any of us expected we would be doing even just a few short weeks ago.

But I am going to make the case that in some ways, this experience is more valuable—and more meaningful—than any graduating class in modern history. You stand in this store today being celebrated not because you hit an arbitrary milestone on an academic calendar, but because your bravery and dedication in the face of this unfathomable crisis deserves our recognition.

As each generation comes and goes, they are often defined by the major events of their time. The WWII generation; the atomic generation; the digital generation. (In my case it was the disco generation, something that just simply doesn’t compete, does it?) You young women and men will come to be known as the COVID generation, like it or not. Historians and sociologists will publish papers for years on the changes in human behavior pre- and post- pandemic. Like the kids who graduated in 1942 after Pearl Harbor was attacked, or the kids who graduated in 2002 after the 9-11 attack in New York and Washington, you will be forever identified by your time—as survivors of the great global pandemic. You will be studied and researched for years after the disease has gone away as the experts wonder what living through a global pandemic does to change the outlook of our next generation of adults.

And while it’s too soon to know the impact this pandemic will ultimately have on our world, if you kids are any indication, I think we can look upon our future with great hope. It’s true that when you took your first job at **[Your Store Name]** IGA after school and on weekends bagging groceries, working the front end, restocking, picking eCommerce orders, and all the million other things you have to do in a normal day in an IGA store—you probably never thought you’d one day be considered heroic. But here you are, most certainly heroes.

However hard your job was before COVID-19, it’s way harder today. Some days it may seem unbelievably stressful. But the real stress is probably not the tasks you do, but the fear of the risk you take. Like first responders, military, police, health care workers, you are on the front lines of a battle against an enemy microscopic in size, but able to lay waste to the global economy like no crisis in modern memory.

And the traffic in our stores means you are exposed to more humans a day than almost any job outside a hospital emergency room. That means you come to work thinking about the risks you face, the risk of unintentional infection on others, on top of what it is like to work in retail. And yet you still come.

Because if you didn’t, the cruel fact is that Americans would starve. Our associates at **[Your Store Name]** IGA and the other 1200 IGA stores in the USA and the 6,000 IGA stores worldwide, do one of the world’s most essential jobs. We feed our communities. Thousands of people working to keep fresh food on shelves so no product is more than few minutes away to the table.

The reality is that what we do—the miracle of the modern US grocery system, the one that allows us to get 40,000 items fresh to grocery stores in the most rural to most urban locations, and do it all at the tiniest of profit margins—is heroic without COVID-19. It just took a global pandemic for everyone to realize that without us, their communities don’t survive. And now the whole world knows what we do is important, necessary, critical—essential.

While your peers sat at home and played Animal Crossing, or watched Tiger King on Netflix, you have been braving crowds of shoppers who need us to stay open. You’ve been dealing with the stress of trying to stay in stock as demand has soared. And like all of **[Your Store Name]**, you’ve been working to stay positive and upbeat with shoppers, even if inside, the tension of being so exposed in such a potentially dangerous time wears at you each and every moment. Know this: the safety protocols we have been using in IGA stores—wash your hands, keep your distance, wear your mask—may be tedious, but they also work. And it means you’re doing your part to keep our country and our world safe.

I don’t know where your plans take you from here, whether to technical school, or college, or graduate school or into a career here in this or another grocery store, wherever your course takes you, know that this experience will serve you well. Future employers will know that you braved a scary world, and did a really hard job when others didn’t. Future bosses will know you stayed the course when times got tough and rose to meet the demand, even when that demand was double or triple anything anyone had experienced before. And your kids one day will know that you – the COVIDIANS of 2020 – helped our communities to be safe, and to survive.

That is heroic.

We forwarded the invitation for this live broadcast out to all our partners in our global IGA family. That includes thousands of stores all over the world. It includes wholesalers and suppliers, and the CEOs of some very big brands. Who knew that a graduation ceremony inside a local grocery store would get such attention?

And yet, all those attending or watching know what I know. You are essential workers, young people who stood up and stayed the course even when others were frightened and isolated. And for that we all want to celebrate not just your graduations, but your courage, your drive and your dedication to your communities.

So, young IGA graduates of the class of I salute you. I, and your entire IGA family are proud of you. And we all know you will go on to do great things.