

Prize Day Address  
by  
Head of School Alixe Callen

*Monday, May 27, 2019*

Welcome. On behalf of the faculty, staff, and trustees of St. George's School, I am thrilled to welcome you to the 2019 Prize Day Exercises, where we recognize the contributions and achievements of the Class of 2019.

It is an honor and a delight to be with you all, and most particularly with you, beloved seniors.

In addition to our Prize Day, today is also Memorial Day, a day when we remember those, including 52 graduates of St. George's, who bravely gave their lives in service and defense of our nation.

I ask that we pause for a moment of silence and reflection to remember their bravery and sacrifice.

[moment of silence]

Thank you.

[Pause]

At a recent alumni event, I spoke with a man who had graduated from St. George's well over 50 years ago. In fact, our conversation was about his 50th reunion, and how it had been different than the reunions that had come before.

In the years prior, he explained, everybody was trying too hard, wanting to portray themselves in the best light possible. Who had the best job, the biggest house, the nicest car, the most talented kids?

But at his 50th reunion, he explained, things got real. No longer was everybody striving to get ahead, to be the most accomplished, to brag about their successful kids or their expensive car.

Instead, he said, after fifty years of trying to best each other, they shared their struggles – the challenges they had faced, the losses they had experienced, their disappointments.

They opened up in new ways, revealing the things that made them happy, but also the difficulties in their lives.

What emerged, explained this man, was a realization that no one's life turned out just as they had imagined it, that even those who had appeared to be living the dream had at some point struggled –

whether it be with addiction or marital issues or professional setbacks, challenges with their children or their parents, physical and mental health, or just the occasional feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy that plague us all.

I was struck by this conversation, and found myself turning it over in my head as I traveled back to campus. After a few days, it suddenly occurred to me why I was so taken with this man's comments.

Everywhere we turn these days, we hear about the dysfunction of today's so-called selfie culture, the pressures of social media, how the need to document one's every move has resulted in a narcissistic, competitive, airbrushed digital world, where younger generations are constantly striving to present themselves in the very best light possible.

And yet, here was this tried and true Baby Boomer, a grandparent of current teenagers, saying that he experienced the same dynamic.

True, it occurred every five years upon the occasion of his reunions, not every day. But still, it appears that this obsession with comparison, this desire to make ourselves look better, is timeless.

Has social media exacerbated the issue? No doubt. But these tendencies have been here all along.

What I love about you Class of 2019 is that, with the support of your amazing teachers, you spent this year explicitly seeking something different, something better.

I want to engage in a bit of time travel. Picture this. It's Wednesday, September 5th, 2018. Just under nine months ago, though it might have been yesterday.

It's a gorgeous late summer evening – beautiful, not too hot, not too cold. You're gathered behind Merrick House, eating dinner, enjoying each other's company, talking about your vision for the upcoming year.

As the mosquitoes come out, you move to the Academic Center Atrium. Mr. Osborne tells his running for the bus story, Thad proclaims the beauty of food trucks, and Colin talks about the importance of showing up.

And then, as Molly recalled in her amazing chapel talk this past Thursday night, the conversation continues at Camp Friendship the following weekend. There, you make a commitment to each other that this year will feel different.

Less discipline, less cynicism, more pride, more joy, more running for the bus, more showing up.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that the year then proceeded without any bumps. There were certainly hard times, moments that called for trust and forgiveness.

In the end, however, you did it, you showed us that it was possible. You made this Hilltop sing with purpose, respect, pride, and joy. And now each and every one of you is sitting right here, and in a few minutes will walk across this stage.

There are so many moments that I will remember when I think back on this class. The slip and slide. Oliver and Jack's ridiculous telekinesis skit in the talent show. The senior/faculty basketball game. Tim's movie. The field hockey team beating Middlesex in overtime in the freezing cold. Each and every chapel talk. Tom's cheer when we opened the turf fields. That afternoon last winter when three of our teams competed in playoff games. The countless lost and found entries. Fiddler on the Roof. Mojo's TBH's.

The introduction of community statements, and the grace with which they were embraced. The prefect skits this spring. (I'm not sure I could get the image of Jackson as honey boo-boo out of my head if I tried.)

Your incessant and collective penchant for knocking on wood. The entire class singing Dancing Queen, followed by the Spice Girls, and then Jerusalem, on the porch of Merrick House last Wednesday night.

Class of 2019, as a group you have been willing to put yourselves out there, to take risks, both big and small. You are willing to look ridiculous. You are willing to try new things.

You have embraced the notion that it takes every one of us to make a community, demonstrating to all of us that the choices – small and large – that we each make every day matter. Truly, you have shown up. Both literally and figuratively.

You showed up for events. And more importantly, you showed up for each other and for our younger students. You supported your fellow Dragons, demonstrating that it's not about who has the nicest clothes, or who gets into the most selective college, or who says the funniest thing on social media.

I want to pause right now and ask you to look at your friends around you. Really look.

What is it that you love about them? Is it what they're wearing? Or what they posted last night on SnapChat? Or how their room is decorated? Or how good they are at sports? The grades they received? Where they are going to college?

I'm willing to bet that the answer is no.

The answer is you love your friends for who they are, for the way they make you feel, for the way they make you smile when you are sad, for their idiosyncrasies, for their strengths and also for their weaknesses.

Each of you will leave this Hilltop today bound for new adventure. Whether it be tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, you will become part of other communities.

And you will have a choice. You can expend your energy trying to make yourself look better, or you can expend your energy doing what you have done here - making your community better.

And I hope that over the years you will return to this Hilltop, to reconnect with each other and your teachers, to share your lives with your classmates.

And when you return, I hope you will do everything you can to keep it real.

Because in the end...

Do you honestly care what kind of car the person sitting next to you will be driving in ten years? Does it matter what college your roommate's children will attend? Whether the person who sat next to you in English class makes partner before 30?

You have the opportunity, seniors, to create a world that is so much better than that, to take what you have done on this Hilltop and carry it out into communities around the globe.

To show the world what can happen when you support each other, when you show up, when you run for the bus.

Thank you for a wonderful year. You will be missed.