



High School Graduation

June 12, 2016

Speech by Gabby Preston, Class of 2016

There are a lot of expectations surrounding our graduation, and all GDS graduations. We're supposed to do great things, change the world, return for our 5 and 10 year reunions as fascinating, selfpossessed and successful global citizens, and all credit GDS with giving us the foundation to be who we are. That is a lot to navigate for a group of people who, for the most part, haven't quite mastered the use of public transportation. Luckily, we have a couple things going for us. For one, our school has a broader definition of success than most — we can be environmental OR civil rights lawyers. Lots of options, everyone. And 2: over our 4 years, we have already adapted to the expectations of academic excellence, selfadvocacy, and willingness to serve which have alternately guided our actions and haunted our anxieties. And I think we've performed well. In fact, in the spirit of that other GDS tradition of asking hard questions, we rose to meet those expectations while simultaneously criticizing their every aspect, as well as the school's mission itself, the administration as a whole and had we had access to the school's budget, I imagine, every expenditure over the last several years...beginning, of course, with the Odradek. Something else we're supposed to do is carry our school's mission out and into the world with us. This spring we spent three days without classes picking apart that mission and deciding what we take from it, analyzing the gaps between what GDS tries to be and what it is, and seeing our school's flaws and challenges and nuances (some of us for the first time, some of us as we do every day). Unexpectedly, we could not be better prepared to view our heavily annotated school mission with clarity. Partially due to some fine print concerning "norms" versus rules, I'm proud to pronounce us a GDS success. Congrats.

But now we're leaving GDS, and we're supposed to begin returning our parent's considerable investment at some point, so we're going to run into some more traditional definitions of success; some more restrictive expectations. For example: Success: move up the chain of academia to move up the chain of employment to put yourself in a position to own things and support your modern family and eventually, not have to work. Associated with normalcy, stability, and security. It even leaves room for passion (as long as it's lucrative) exploration (on vacation time), and individuality (in your preexisting field of choice). And it's outdated. And it's hard to escape. That whole "Follow your dreams and everything will work out" line is not comforting even if you have an idea of what you want to do, and I know most of us have no idea. I know I don't.

In fact, one of my favorite things about GDS is that no one really does just one thing. Pretty much every student has at least one project on the side, probably a few over the years, in addition to our academic lives...Or sometimes instead of academic life. We don't get that much free time, but we tend to find the space to do what we want. And we have a lot of things we want to do. I don't think the traditional path is a good fit for all of us; having to pick and choose which dimension of our interests should get squeezed into a marketable profession and which

should get filed under “Something on the Weekends, Maybe” sounds terrible. On the other hand, “Be Who You Are and Someone Will Pay You For That” sounds blissfully idealistic enough to make me reconsider that Accounting degree that scares me. Here’s the deciding factor for me: We’re lucky. Ridiculously lucky. GDS students do more because of course we do, because we’re flooded with resources to help us do whatever weird nonsense we happen to be into. Sometimes we like to pretend that we’re not an elite school, but we are. This is a place with a big network of highpowered connections. (if you haven’t already, walk around Congress with Sue some time and try to find a committee that doesn’t have at least one GDS alum or parent. It’s fun. You can’t find one.) Not only that but also a fulltime staff devoted to making our academic lives as fulfilling as possible — us. Teenagers. Who haven’t done anything yet. It’s insane. When I say we’re lucky, I don’t mean that everything has been easy for us. GDS isn’t perfect; of course it’s a reflection of this world and this country we live in; GDS is not a place that can always guarantee protection and support and security for every student. I’m not sure that place exists yet. And though that may be what GDS tried to do for us, I couldn’t stand here as a representative of my class and fail to tell you that there have been times when it didn’t try hard enough, and that there are students here for whom GDS never succeeded. Unfortunately, it shouldn’t be a surprise to hear that, though it’s hard for me to say. But it’s a part of our story. It’s a part of who we are as a class; and maybe, hopefully not, but maybe, a part of who every GDS graduating class is. To our administration: Thank you for doing your best — I appreciate the strength of your effort. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. Hopefully, we’ve learned how to fight for both the protections that were given to us and those that we recognized were missing from our school. For ourselves and for those around us, and for those who aren’t in the position to fight the way that we are. That’s what I mean when I say we’re lucky.

It’s not just that traditional success isn’t a good fit for us, or that we just hate anything with traditional in the name (all these white dresses are lovely, by the way, we look great). It’s that we have a responsibility to do more because we have more. A responsibility to do more because we have more. With that in mind, I’d like us, Class of 2016, to focus on impact, rather than success, because I think it’s a better measure for our actions. For example, Impact: the lasting effects that result from your efforts towards whatever it is that you give your time to. Associated with your legacy and your values. Your signature. Larger than your concrete accomplishments and career milestones, taking the form of the people who remember you and what you did, the ideas that you generated and established, your influence over the things you touched. The difference that your presence makes. Before we leave GDS, it’s important to think about what we built here as a class and as individuals, and what we did to make those things last. It’s important that we understand the skills required for building something to last.

For me, the most direct way to think about my own impact at GDS has been to try to model myself after the people who have been influential to me. Lisa Rauschart, who has managed to fit at least one book recommendation into nearly every conversation we’ve had since freshman year, does nothing but create opportunities for students whether or not she’s actually taught them. So much so that even if you don’t know Lisa or have somehow not been present for any of the assemblies she’s organized (obviously back when they weren’t mandatory, I mean), you’ve probably been a part of one of her programs without realizing it. She is tremendously dedicated to teaching, and her impact on GDS has been huge. Be like Lisa.

Since I met him in the 8th grade and for however long before then, Bobby Asher has been playing way too many roles at our school for the amount of time he has to give and certainly the

amount of recognition he receives, though he definitely hates that I just said that — everyone look at Bobby so he gets even more uncomfortable. Bobby finds near infinite energy to be whatever his classes need, and then whatever the school needs, and then whatever the students ask for his help on any given day need, and then what his Women's Varsity basketball team needs (we beat Sidwell too, just saying), and then goes home to be whatever his family needs / watch TED talks and basketball videos while ignoring his family. GDS would not be the same without him. Be like Bobby.

That's just two examples. There are plenty for us to follow. I know everyone here has a faculty member who's been particularly influential for them over their time here. I know we're ready to be highimpact in whatever context we find ourselves in. I know we're going to be. We're better equipped than the average student, and as I said, that comes with responsibility. To do more. To lead. To think about our impact on a scale larger than ourselves. And in whatever communities we become a part of, whatever professions, whatever issues or inequities we choose to target, to have a lasting effect. Whatever it is that you care about, write your name on it.

I'm incredibly proud to be graduating as part of this class. I love you guys. Thank your teachers and families. Thank you, Mom and Dad, so much, for making my education a priority long before I knew enough to make it a priority for myself. It's the most important part of my life — thank you for all the sacrifices you made to give it to me. I know I don't say that enough, but I think about it every day. Thank you for all the books. Thanks.