



High School Graduation

June 12, 2016

Speech by Stuart Ishimaru, Parent of Class of 2016

People have been asking me for the last week or so, “Speech done?” Given the record in our house, things quite often don’t get done until the last minute, if at all. But indeed something is done, and hopefully, in a few minutes, you can judge whether it was OK or not.

The other piece of wisdom or comfort that someone in my household, my wife, gave to me before we came today is “Well, don’t worry, it’s just kids. Kids preceding you, and Harold. What could happen?”

Well, here I am. And these are hard acts to follow.

I am honored and delighted to be here today.

Before I begin to speak, I wanted to honor all the grandparents and special friends here in the audience. For those of you who have been with us from the Lower and Middle Schools, there is a terrific tradition of welcoming grandparents and special friends to the school the Friday before Mother’s Day every year. My own mother was a big fan of Grandparent’s Day; she tried to make them all over the years, and was disappointed there wasn’t one in the High School, but that it ended in Middle School. She was hoping to be here today for graduation, but passed away in December. So I wanted to give a special welcome to the grandparents and special friends who are here today and especially honor all those who could not be with us today, but would have wanted to join in the celebration. Let us honor and remember them.

Congratulations to the class of 2016. As parents, the range of your talents, skills and insights never ceased to amaze us—from the classroom, to the stage, to the field, to the studio, to the hallways, and to our homes. As parents, we always hoped that by the time we sent you off to college, and on your way with life you would be ready—poised, thoughtful, insightful and kind. While we may have had our doubts along the way from Kindergarten and Pre-K, seeing your growth and maturity today and reflecting in the last few weeks reaffirms the joy it is to be a parent.

And thank you, too, to the faculty and staff. The High School has been magical for us. It’s been absolutely wonderful seeing how people blossom during high school and all the opportunities that are there. But it wasn’t just the High School for us. It’s been for Matthew since Kindergarten, and for Ben since Pre-K, all the way through, I can’t begin to tell you how many back-to-school nights I sat there sort of lost because I didn’t quite understand what the kids were learning, say, since second grade. It’s been a wonderful experience. Our thanks to you, we know how much hard work and thought goes into it. We take great comfort from that.

Graduation from high school is the end of one chapter and the beginning of another in one’s life.

For me, it leads me to think back to our long association with GDS and the people we know, starting back from future GDS classmates in our childbirth class and from the infant room at the day care center. We've known a lot of people for a long time from Kindergarten, and now culminating with this commencement.

I think back to our search for a school community back in 2002, the year many of the lifers who started in pre-K began at the school. I'd run into the same faces as went from school to school. I remember Kristin Tappan on the same circuit as I was, looking for right school for her twins as we were looking for our son. We were looking for something wonderful and nurturing with a strong academic program. But what we found at GDS was something more—founded in 1945 as an integrated school, the first of its kind in Washington, DC, with an ongoing commitment to social justice. This struck us as something more, something that reflected our life choices as a family and something that we would want to invest in for our education. To join a community of common interest.

Justice, equality, fairness, community. The hallmarks of GDS resonated with us, as did its history.

Think back, if you will, to that founding year, 1945, 71 years ago. How much our world and our country have changed since then. In 1945, Washington, DC, was racially segregated by both law and custom. We could not imagine a setting like this, with a crowd like this, at that time. Our schools, our restaurants and theaters, our jobs and our housing, all segregated. Opportunities for women were not better, with few opportunities except for those that happened to pop up during the war.

On a personal note, in 1945, my family lived far away from Washington. My parents and my grandparents were living in beautiful Topaz, Utah, the "jewel of the desert" incarcerated by our government in an internment camp for Japanese Americans during World War II. Agnieszka's family lived in war-ravaged Poland, Warsaw destroyed by the battles in the war. In 1945 Agnieszka and I could not have been married in either Virginia or Maryland due to the anti-miscegenation laws in force at the time. The fight for equality and fairness based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin, let alone disability, age or sexual orientation, were in practice abstract principles, almost beyond comprehension. But the notion of an integrated school, flouting all convention at the time, was made real by the founding of GDS.

Over time, things in our society began to change. Our nation developed an understanding that in order to bring about fundamental change, change had to be grounded in structure and process, that decisions should be grounded in fairness and equality, not preferring or assuming one class or group over another. How do we embrace our whole community, during good times and bad, working through our mistakes and allowing opportunity to flourish?

A series of things happened. The Supreme Court struck down school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Changing immigration laws in the early 1950s allowed my grandparents to become citizens of the U.S., which they were barred from doing based on their race due to a series of Asian Exclusion Acts. The 1960s brought civil rights laws enacted by the Congress that banned discrimination based in voting, education, employment, public accommodations, and housing. Opportunities in our schools, our workplaces and our neighborhoods. A realization that gender equality was not a joke, as they tried to do in the 1964

Civil Rights Act, and the bill passed anyway. But that it also includes freedom from sexual harassment and assault. Most recently we started to provide anti-discrimination protections for people with disabilities and for people from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities.

These are not abstract principles. These affect our families, our communities and ourselves. They go to the fundamental core of our nation and our being.

And in 2008, when our nation elected its first African American president, frankly one thing I never thought I would see in my lifetime, we thought things had really begun to change. And there was much talk at the time of a “post-racial” society, and that all of these hard issues have gone away.

But, really, has that happened? Have the challenges of discrimination gone away? Have we progressed to the point where we are in a post-racial society? Do we hear and understand the various stories that communities have in an increasingly diverse country? Do we in fact treat divided communities fairly?

I think the answer, frankly, is no. You can pick up the paper any day of the week, you can pick up today’s New York Times and read about it in the Magazine, about the choices people have to make in segregated neighborhood trying to find a good education for their children.

GDS has made civil rights and social justice a core part of its being. It is one of the reasons that attracted us, and so many others, to the school.

But as much as we’d like, as much as we try, there is no magic pill, no silver bullet. Issues around race, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity and other related issues are complex and often conflict. They raise passionate views and debate, with good reason, for it goes to the very core of our identities. While traditions are important, merely repeating mantras will not address the complicated and complex relationships we see today. We must do more, we can’t assume we know the stories of others—we need to listen, and try to understand the stories and the relationships in which we live, and craft solutions and paths forward.

As a community, we are blessed with privilege and opportunity. Some call it a bubble. I was told not to call it a bubble. But indeed we live in a bubble, a very comfortable bubble. Most of us in this country and most in the world beyond are different in so many ways from the GDS bubble. But a bubble it is.

Once you leave this bubble, maybe you move on to another. And if you do, so be it. But hopefully as you move on, you’ll have a chance to learn and a chance to understand, a chance to expand your horizons and experiences.

Due to the wonders of the internet and Facebook, someone sent me recently a picture of me speaking two generations ago at my own high school graduation. My hair was a bit shorter, a lot darker, and there was a lot more of it. And I don’t remember what I said. So I want to leave you with some closing thoughts, because I know diplomas are next, and you don’t need to hear some old guy blathering on for much longer.

Strong social bonds and relationships are so important. And perhaps in this day when I see in my own household people using their electronic devices, to the exclusion of others and the dog, it can't be overstated as you go off to this new adventure, how do you create these social bonds, how do you create these relationships, things that will last you as they have during your days at the high school, for likely the rest of your life.

We live in a bubble, yes, but the universe, in fact, is broad. Find and be active in your community, wherever it may be. And be kind to people, because it's the right thing to do, and at the very least, you never know where people will return to your own journey.

Find ways to give back—to fight for equality and fairness, for due process, for standing up for what you believe in.

This spring there was a headline in the paper that caught my eye, and it said “Will you sprint, stroll, or stumble into a career?”

Getting in to college is just the beginning; it's not a four year vacation. What you do there is more important. Taking full advantage, as an educated consumer, is so important, so you get the most out of the next part of your journey. And I think and my guess is GDS has prepared you well for that. But you should also know that for a lot of us we have taken this zig-zag path through our careers. As you can see in my bio I can't hold a job for more than a few years at a time. But life and opportunities come from all places (and often unexpected angles), and there is nothing wrong with this, finding your way and your passion over time.

And don't be afraid to start young. I often think back to the incredible lives of the leaders of the civil rights movement, people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and also Congressman John Lewis and Ambassador Andrew Young, both of whom you've heard from in recent years at GDS. While they seem iconic now, but back then they were basically kids in their 20s and 30s—not much older than you are now. There's no need to wait for gray hair (or no hair). Go off and do it.

Seize the opportunity wherever it may take you, and make us proud. Let's emulate those visionary founders of GDS from 71 years ago— making a difference in your life and the lives of others.

Godspeed.