



High School Graduation

June 11, 2017

Speech by Rohan Palacios, Class of 2017

A GDS graduation ceremony is a strange idea. As students, we have been fixated on “the journey” to such a degree that the destination, our official graduation from high school, seems like a footnote. As far as my classmates and I are concerned, school finished weeks ago when we finished our final classes and finally said a permanent goodbye to the College Board. Everybody was done and happy about it. We really thought. Soon we found out there are placement tests, housing forms, and scholarship applications still to be completed. But, free from any real obligations for the moment, we left the building for the last time as students. I then began to realize how important a moment this would be for many of us. Some of my classmates have been part of GDS for over thirteen years, and some of their parents for even longer than that. As graduation got closer, we started to forget some of the things we’d been complaining about all year. We must be getting nostalgic, considering that earlier this year, we were trying to find a way to swing two skip days. At this rate, by the next time we see each other the only things we’ll remember from high school will be Tom Yoder, Harold, and Hopper day.

While today marks the end of an era for many, a lot of us arrived in this community only four years ago, myself included. I had a lot of trouble adjusting; I called my freshman biology teacher “Ms. Coates” so many times that I temporarily stopped raising my hand in class. Even after four years, life at GDS still strikes me as strange. I can’t lie; almost every day I went to school something bizarre happened. Like the time the cardboard club dropped a heavy box with some wings from the second floor, smack onto a couch I was sitting on. I was real mad but all the teachers that were watching clapped, and I’m pretty sure the club got featured on the

website for that. Or the time I found out we had a rock climbing team...and that my little sister was going to be a star, and our family's first varsity athlete. Those are huge bragging rights for someone who left her first PE class really confused about who Tom Brady is. And I still have no clue what an Odradek is.

But, what makes GDS worthwhile is what it gives us. Schools create an artificial environment for learning, and at GDS we're insulated from a lot of the turbulence of the world we're supposed to be preparing for. Our school was not founded to give a prestigious education to the children of prestigious people, but that is often GDS's reality. We're an odd community, and in leaving we are about to meet a lot of people who will look at us funny when we talk about our intersecting identities or when we laugh anytime someone orders ranch.

Still, no one should take for granted the value of spending time here. Whatever criticisms can be made about diversity at GDS: racial, socioeconomic, or of thought, we are still a collection of unique individuals. GDS forces us to listen to each other to the degree to which it sometimes seems as though the school is pushing sensitivity training. Some people find this tiresome, but I hope that we appreciate what our mandatory exercise in empathy means for the rest of our lives. We will never again be forced to care. I've failed many times throughout high school. I've flunked tests, messed up lines, and I've sent out multiple all school emails with typos in them. But, the only times I've felt like a failure were times I failed to consider others. The times I embarrassed a classmate by speaking carelessly about something which affected them deeply. The times I failed to consider how my actions would hurt a friend. Those mistakes are the ones that keep me up at night.

In my mind that's what sets our education apart from any other school: public, private, or religious. After four years at GDS, I'm not smarter than friends who went to Wilson or Sidwell. But I do feel as though I've gained a greater appreciation for the complexity of people. The

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world is going to ask us to compete and do everything we can to distinguish ourselves from the pack. It would be a waste of the education we got here, from each other, if life becomes a blind pursuit of our own interests. We all have ambitions for ourselves, but our behavior has far reaching implications. In high school, our influence was confined to our small community. In the future we will have real, practical power, which extends beyond our immediate surroundings. When that happens, we need to remember the lessons we learned from one another. We need to be able to see things from different perspectives and act accordingly. Empathy and understanding are traits lacking in a cynical society, but their value is very real. Just as practising them in school made us better classmates, practicing them in life will make us better people.

Today is a day to empathize with our families. Thank you to all the parents for your investment in us, and your faith that we'll be worth it one day. I'm never going to win an Oscar, so this is my best chance to fulfill a promise I've been making as long as I can remember. Thank you Mama. Thank you for teaching the virtue of patience, and *usually* modeling it. Thank you for being a constant example of the value of hard work and self-reliance. Thank you for all your sacrifices. Everything I do is for you.

To my class, you are a remarkable group of people. We've got a compelling mix of choreographers, actors, magicians, activists, singers, athletes, researchers, and writers. I don't think we'll be able to appreciate how impressive our classmates are until we spend some time apart. The one thing that we all have in common, is that over the last four years we've learned how to deal with each other. We know how to live and work together in a way that we don't share with anyone else. Whether we wanted to or not, we've spent a lot time working to understand each other. We haven't always succeeded in doing so, but I hope we never stop trying.

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Thanks.