



High School Graduation

June 7, 2015

Speech by Nina Pillard, Parent Speaker

Good afternoon teachers, administrators, coaches, grandparents, parents, relatives and friends, and the GDS class of 2015! What a day of accomplishment, excitement and promise.

As my first child graduates from high school and prepares to leave the wonderful world of GDS, I have been feeling nostalgic. At what other high school could our children have studied under teachers more talented than most university professors, offering curricula more sophisticated than some of what you get at the best colleges, and at University prices? But really, Class of 2015, I imagine that you are feeling wistful as you mark the close of your time in this community.

So here's some happy news: The school's Board and Administration has authorized me to make a very exciting announcement. You know the big real estate purchase of the Safeway property; the school had an opportunity to purchase the adjoining parcel down to the Pete's A-Pizza. I am proud to share with you that it will be used as the site of the new Georgetown Day College. That's right. You don't have to leave GDS after all!

Seriously, it has been great. But you are ready to move on. I have only a few minutes to try to say something useful and profound to send you off.

I'm not sure whether Russell understood what he was getting into when he asked me to speak to you today. When I was sitting where you are, graduating from high school, I had been to three different high schools in four years. No, I was not an Army brat: The family never moved. I graduated from a small, quirky and intellectual school in Boston—not unlike GDS. When I was sitting where you are, on high school graduation day, I had not so much as applied to college. Much like a GDS student, I was questioning and skeptical. If I were to go to college, I wanted to understand why. I can only imagine how annoying I must have been.

Decades have passed since then. When I look back over my life—and this is true, I'm sure, for most of the adults in the room—when I look back, the terrain seems clearly mapped: The

college major, internships, law school, clerkship, fellowship, the jobs that follow one after the next. Until here we are, as if it were all planned. In hindsight, my career has logic to it centering on equal rights, public service, access to justice. But when I was sitting where you are, looking forward, I did not have a life plan.

What I did have is what you have: A certain kind of education, and the loving support of my friends and family. And that is very important. It gives you the ability to make choices. What I chose after high school was to go to a place in the world that was as different as possible from where I grew up. I found that doing antipoverty work in a village in India. There I lived, as much of the world's population does, with no running water and intermittent electricity. It set me on my path.

Each step from there I chose incrementally, and at least in part just because I had to: pick a major, get a job, do something, support myself. With growing sureness over time, I chose to do things that I discovered were meaningful to me, that answered my sense of purpose, that became my passion—to advance equality and justice.

Upon your high school graduation, you may not have a life-sized passion—regardless of what you may have said in your college essay. And, like me when I sat where you are today, you may not have a plan. But you can be intentional about the choices you make. Your path will be different from mine. It will be your own. And you will find it.

So what advice can I offer? This is tricky. I am here as a representative of all of us parents at a moment when our relationship to you, our graduating children, is about to change more fundamentally than at any time since we first dropped you off at daycare, teary-eyed (at least we were).

In fact, this transition made me recall that one so much that I was moved to pull down my old copy of the famous parenting bible of our generation: *What to Expect: The Toddler Years*.

I want to share with you what the book says about deciding whether or not your child is ready for the transition to preschool:

Is your child ready for preschool? Take this brief quiz:

1. Does your child know how to understand and follow simple directions? Y/N
2. Does your child know how to make decisions? Y/N
3. Is your child used to a structured schedule? Y/N
4. Does your child have basic self-care skills, like washing hands, and eating lunch or a snack without help from you? Y/N
5. Can your child do simple chores, such as:
 - Putting Away Toys
 - Sorting Laundry
 - Dusting
 - Food Prep
 - Setting and Clearing the table
 - Watering Plants
 - Sweeping and Vacuuming
 - Putting Away Groceries
 - Feeding the Family Pet?

Can your two-year-old do this? Can my graduating senior do this!? This list gave me pause. You need to do these things. They are not unimportant, these basic life skills. Some we master, some we manage, and some we work around.

The good news is that, with just a few basic life skills, some self knowledge, and your GDS education, you have more than enough to take the next step on your path. We are so eager to see where your paths lead.

So what advice can I give you? I thought about emphasizing perseverance and resilience; keeping your eye on the big picture, on what matters. I have a favorite quote from Nelson Mandela: “Do not judge me by my successes; judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.” I thought I could elaborate on that, and give you a few insights from my own life.

But you are the GDS class of 2015. You know this already.

The hallmark of GDS is that the adults stand back and let the students figure it out. I remember when Aidan visited GDS as a prospective third grader, and he came home wide eyed. He was

amazed that, between class periods, the kids walked from one classroom to another without having to line up and have a teacher accompany them. (I understand the high school allows that as well). Aidan wanted to come to this school, where kids are given a lot of freedom and trusted to take responsibility for their own learning.

GDS is a very challenging place. This is not just your average excellent private school: You have had tough, unstinting feedback from your teachers. You have faced the dreaded “interim.” You have forgotten a line in a One Act, or missed a step in Fata Morgana, or had the microphone scream at you or go silent during Cabaret. You have forgotten to bring your lunch to school, and you’ve picked yourself up by the bootstraps and run on over to Coffee Nature. You have gone toe to toe with extraordinary competitors and had some painful losses on the field, and at the debate podium. (Well, maybe more on the field than at the debate podium.)

In thinking about what to say to you today, I also considered advising you to put your sharp minds, excellent education, and powerful hearts to work on issues of pressing social justice. You will face enormous challenges in your lifetime. They will require more creativity, more commitment, more investment of yourselves than we can know. Thinking about those challenges brought to my mind this uplifting insight from anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

But you are GDS graduates. You are already committed to healing our world, making it more beautiful through art, better understood through science and with the written word, and fairer by advancement of decent treatment and dignity of every person. You came home to us during freshman year and enlightened us about the Big Eight. You are masters of new technologies with magical capabilities. You have been holding feminist bake sales, where the girls pay 79 cents for every dollar the boys pay. You have written essays for classes, and articles in the Augur Bit that have opened our eyes. Just this past semester, we heard about GDS students’ trip to Selma and the visit to GDS of Congressman John Lewis, a leader of that famous march. You know the importance of decency to others – not only in your immediate circle, your family, your school and your community, but in the larger world.

This is not really a moment for parental wisdom or advice-giving. You are graduates. You are moving up, moving out, moving on. This is a time for us to step back and trust you to meet your

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own journey fully and completely.

So I will do just that. After one more piece of advice. We have an essential rule in our family, which I hope Aidan won't mind my repeating here: "Keep talking to your parents." That may require you to speak through your phone, not just text.

Graduating seniors, on behalf of all the parents and everyone else here, thank you for lighting up our lives. Please know that, anywhere you are, you will always be surrounded by our love.

Congratulations. We are so proud of you!