



High School Graduation

June 7, 2015

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon. It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the 44th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2015. Today it is our shared privilege to celebrate these terrific young women and men and to send them on their way.

Graduates: You are a remarkable class, and I am not the first person to point this out. In fact, some of you have told me this yourselves. Seriously, as seniors, you set a tone for GDS, and we, as adults, could not have asked for a better tone to be set. Your voice, leadership, talent, passion, integrity, and deep commitment to our mission have powerfully enriched our school community.

There are so many moments, I know, for each of you, that will embody your GDS experience, and so many moments, for us, that have helped to define you as individuals and a group: your astonishing vocal, theater, and dance performances; your outstanding “It’s Academic” and Quiz Bowl feats; your rein of championships in cross country and track and field; your activism; your stunning visual art; not to mention the fact that you were pretty good students. But I want to talk about a different moment, one that unfolded just a few months ago: your senior prank.

Having worked in schools now for more than 20 years, and having once been a high school senior myself, I know that the senior prank is something that is rarely done well, and has the potential to go horribly awry. What begins as a well-intentioned idea quickly goes off the rails and can lead to a variety of bad outcomes.

Cirque de GDS was something else entirely. Instead of wreaking havoc, you created a fun and festive day for the entire High School. There was a moon bounce in the Forum. Cotton candy. Snow cones. You even brought your tricycles up from the Big Toy so you could reconnect with your inner kindergartener.

And, seniors, unbeknownst to all of you, your prank brought me one of my more memorable, surreal moments of the year. At about one o'clock on the day of your prank, I was sitting in my office having a meeting. It had been a long day, a day where a number of things had gone awry, and I had had the distinct pleasure of learning about each of these things in great detail. So that afternoon I was meeting with a concerned constituent--I won't share any more detail than that, and as this constituent shared his concern, I was doing my best active listening, nodding carefully and looking appropriately grave. And then, through the window immediately behind the person who I was so carefully listening to, I saw a llama. Or perhaps it was an alpaca--I sometimes get them confused. At any rate, it was tall, and graceful, and on a leash being led by one of you. And immediately behind the llama came a pony. The pony was tiny--I didn't think they made ponies that small. Crowds of students were outside cheering, following the llama and the pony up and down Davenport Street. And all the while, I continued to listen and nod, and my constituent continued to share his concerns, and silently, I thanked each of you. And so, today, I get to do so out loud. Thank you, seniors.

Class of 2015, as you embark from our community and prepare to head off to college and your next adventure, I've been reflecting on what you'll need for your journey, and what GDS has given you to take along. One thing that I urge you to bring is the joyful spirit that you brought to our classrooms and hallways every day, and that led to Cirque de GDS. You already know that life offers plenty of hard moments, plenty of cause for seriousness. Bringing a little spontaneous joy to the world every once in a while is a meaningful gift.

Several weeks ago, I wrote to you and asked you what you think you'll be taking with you from GDS. I received a wealth of answers, far too many to share today. So here's a brief sampling, seniors, of what you will be taking with you from 4200 Davenport Street.

Jenny Riemer writes:

I will be taking Joy with me. Even now it's hard naming the many joys of GDS, but I'll try. It's the steps in the forum, the intense class discussions, the bond between student and teacher. It's the everyday conversations that aren't so everyday, because I know that at other places, people don't talk about what GDS kids talk about. It's the passion of the teachers. It's the competitive yet supportive students. It's being able to walk into C.A's office and have a conversation. It's the joy I feel walking into GDS everyday, the joy of feeling at home. You know how in your house you have a place you go when you're upset? Maybe your porch or your bedroom, or a secret

room you discovered in your closet. I had rooms like that in my house, but GDS was another place I could go, another safe place for me, one for which I'll always be grateful.

Emma Stern writes:

I will take my white "GDS Mediator" hat, not only because it is a stylish and timeless piece but because putting it on makes me feel just as powerful and confident as it did when I put it on in 5th grade.

Chris Hopson writes:

I have changed a lot in the seven years since I began at GDS thanks to one thing I hope will never change about our school: the promotion of constructive challenge. GDS is a place of challenge. Some of these challenges are faced individually: academic challenges, social challenges, the challenge of navigating the bubble. Some of these challenges are faced collectively: the challenge of staying true to our history while not getting left behind, the challenge of honoring and affirming everyone in our community while working through occasionally stark differences. But with all this challenge comes support. Adults, students, and peers help each other as we and our School try to progress. Our search for progress is rarely easy and rarely cut-and-dry, but the only way for us to advance is if we turn the critical eye we've been taught by GDS back onto this school that we inhabit. Only institutions that are capable of self-reflection are capable of change. The same is true for individuals. And so the challenges we collectively face at GDS and the challenges we individually face become indistinguishable. We're all torn between living by our ideals and being pragmatic. We all struggle to reconcile our differences with the people around us, and the people that we care about. So what I'll take with me from this place is an understanding of the necessity to push and to be pushed, a willingness to criticize and to accept criticism. Because with those values, I know that change and progress are all but inevitable.

Aidan Pillard writes:

I'll take away teachers as friends and friends as teachers. And my friends, from whom I learn so very much, don't even judge me for being friends with my teachers. I'll love GDS forever and miss it already.

Andie Asher writes:

I will take a constant desire to learn about and engage in the world around me.

Mac Andrews writes:

GDS taught me the impact of unconditional support. This year I went way outside of my comfort zone in auditioning for the one act plays. At most other high schools, as an athlete trying something new (in God forbid, the theater), I would have been ridiculed. But, at GDS, I was welcomed with open arms into a new, unfamiliar group. GDS has encouraged me to take risks and test my personal boundaries. As I leave GDS I will bring with me the value of risk-taking and the value of community.

Arianna Neal writes:

I will take wonderful memories, belly-aching laughs, and amazing friends.

Jacob Stern writes:

I will take what the school's mission statement calls "a lifelong love of learning." What this means to me and what GDS has instilled in me is an understanding of the intrinsic value of learning--an understanding that the pursuit of knowledge is not utilitarian but rather is a worthwhile enterprise in and of itself.

Julia Smith writes:

I am taking from GDS a worn out back pack, socks with grasshoppers on them, 31 dog-eared books from four years of GDS English, some calculus Christmas carols, a set of sturdy work gloves for farming, a box of well-used colored pencils, a pair of running shoes, a love for small green insects that hop, and my self confidence. GDS has taught me to not be afraid of what other people think. At GDS I have learned to trust my ideas and beliefs, to speak up for what I believe in, and to ask questions that don't always have answers. At GDS, I have become comfortable enough with myself that I am not afraid to make mistakes or to ask for help when I need it. It is this trust in myself that has allowed me to take risks and to jump outside the boundaries of my comfort zone every so often. The self-confidence that I have gained at GDS has helped me to stay true to myself, instead of who the world tells me to be, enabling me to appreciate other people for the unique individuals that they are. As I prepare to leave GDS, I know that it will be easy to forget and doubt myself in the years to come. But I also know that I will have my socks, books, colored-pencils, gloves, calculus carols, shoes, and Hopper pride to

remind me to have confidence in the person that I am.

Liam Albritton writes:

GDS undoubtedly gave me an education that I'll value for the rest of my life. I could write at length about the excellent academic foundation GDS provided for me, as I'm sure many others could. But what I want to write about is sports: yes, I'll take from GDS a lifelong love of sports. I came to GDS in ninth grade as a remarkably mediocre cross country runner who was in it for myself. At the time I thought, "Alright, yeah, I'll do this to stay in shape and because I like running." I could not have anticipated the profound friendships I would leave with; before long, I learned that we won as a team and lost as a team, and if part of GDS is about tearing down stigmas, then we destroyed the stigma of running as an individual sport. The team atmosphere made me not just a runner, but a competitor--I wanted us to dominate other schools because I knew (and know) that no other program does it quite like GDS. I have never felt more a part of something.

Rachel Risoleo writes:

I will take from GDS that it is okay to fail. When I was little, I was often told, "you learn from your mistakes," but I didn't really believe it. I actually thought I should do my best to avoid failure. At GDS, however, some of my most important personal discoveries have been the product of failure. In some cases these products might take the form of a great college essay topic or a nice anecdote, however they often lead to much deeper realizations, such as the understanding that sometimes all you have to do is ask. At GDS we are actively encouraged to take risks, and are surrounded by those who do. It is celebrated to voice a dissenting opinion in the classroom, and we are constantly emboldened to take the more challenging class, surround ourselves with people whose ideas and ideals conflict with ours, or join a sports team for the first time. GDS has given me the strength to take risks without fear of "failure," and has inspired me to not only tolerate my own failures, but rather to embrace them.

and Kalila Morsink writes:

From GDS I will be bringing the Odyssey (annotated, starring Odysseus); four color-coded Hoppers (covers falling off); more Class of 2015 shirts, tank tops, and jerseys than I know what to do with; a disinclination to address adults using honorifics, and an inclination to look them in the eye. A quarter-zip fleece from the soccer team and a tie-dyed T-shirt from Rainbow Connections. The habit of smiling at people when I pass them in the hallway. The habit of

starting conversations with them. An inclination to reserve all judgments, like Nick Carraway, and an inclination to start arguments, like Evan Smith. An hour-long conversation about the concept of infinity; an hour-and-a-half-long conversation about Ferguson; at least four Facebook conversations about whether or not we're going to have a snow day. The email addresses of several hundred people who will probably write me back should I write them, and who will probably hit reply all. And, an odyssey (not yet annotated, starring myself, who is ready to take on the world).

Seniors, as I think about you settling into your college dorm rooms and unpacking your laptops and running shoes and various musical instruments, don't forget the other things that you are bringing with you, things that you've taken from GDS: Your memories, friendships and a sense of community, of course, but also courage, confidence, curiosity, a critical eye, a love of learning, an appreciation for diversity, and a strong voice.

On Wednesday at your graduation rehearsal, I added one more thing to your list, when I gave you each a book, *Americanah*, a novel by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Americanah* tells the story of a young Nigerian woman who migrates to the US for university and then stays. The book shares a number of rich themes, perhaps most powerfully, that of identity. I hope that GDS has taught you each to be proud of your own identity, and to know that the world is a better place for the unique voice you bring to it.

When CA hands you your diplomas--very soon!, you will officially be alums. Some of you have been part of GDS for just a few short years. Some of you are lifers. And then there's Isabel Schneiderman, who is part of a 30-year streak of the Schneiderman family in our school, begun by Abby Schneiderman in 1985.

Regardless of when you began at GDS, we are counting on you returning often. When you return for your five-year reunion in 2020, we hope you'll be returning to a unified GDS campus on Davenport Street. And yet you each know that GDS is much more than buildings, much more than a campus. GDS is the profound belief in the capacity of young people to grow, to thrive, to engage, and ultimately, to change the world. So, no matter what the nature of our physical campus, that is the GDS that you will be coming back to.

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And when you do come back, feel free to bring a llama. And a pony.

We love you, Class of 2015. We believe in you. And we are very, very proud of you.