



# High School Graduation

June 9, 2019

Speech by Shonali Palacios, Class of 2019

I don't know if everyone here or even anyone here remembers their first day of high school. Personally, I can't forget mine. It started with somebody getting their finger broken during the Senior Run-in. After that I sat through an English class I wasn't registered for, and almost repeated that mistake the next period by walking into an AP Bio class. Somewhere though, in that first day between all the excitement and the embarrassment of explaining how I managed to screw up my schedule multiple times I got acquainted with the people sitting behind me. I had no idea then what our next four years would hold for us together, and now, standing here in front of you, I've resigned myself to the fact that there's no perfect way for me to bookend what we've collectively experienced -- to the fact that there are no words adequate to describe how thankful I am to have been a part of the class of 2019.

Every hour I've spent at GDS has given me a new appreciation of the people surrounding me -- one day that looks like cardboard club testing out their latest contraption, the next it's an acapella performance in the staircase, it's realizing on Quest night that Phillip is an amazing writer, or during a Monday Meeting that Thandie has the voice of an angel. It's arguing with Jake and Sophia in English, and with Will Klein and Daniel in history. It's reading William's version of this speech and realizing that I have to make mine a lot better. It's watching Joyce, Benji, and Neha lead our Asian American Affinity group, watching Jeff, Michelle, and Maddi lead SSC, watching Brion call our Head of School "Big Russ" in an all school email chain, and of course it's watching the people I've known since I was five grow into leaders of dance troupes, advocacy groups, theater departments and sports teams.

Unless you're up here on the stage with me right now some of the names I listed may not be familiar to you, but I assure you if I had the time I could and would go through the whole roster like this. Whoever you're here for has in some way become an integral part of something beautiful, and none of us could have gotten to where we are without the support and love of those surrounding us. My three biggest heroes are sitting somewhere in this crowd and even

though I told them I wasn't going to do this to avoid being cliché I lied -- Mama, Papa, and Rohan I love you all so much and I will never stop trying to make you proud. None of us have gotten to graduation alone and I know I speak for everyone when I say that to our families, friends, neighbors, teachers, coaches, and anyone else who invested their time and energy in our lives: We will never be able to repay you fully, but we won't waste what you've given us.

As an 18 year old with no more life experience than anyone else here I'm not really in a position to give advice to my class, but I will say this: As we all applied to college this year what most of us already had some sense of, that admissions can be just as much about privilege as they are about merit, was confirmed by the Varsity Blues bribery scandal. I don't bring it up to discredit anyone's hard work, but because I think it's an event that illustrates the need for us to be intrinsically motivated. Though in many ways we are a uniquely privileged group of people, in a world where connections and wealth play such a large part in gaining social markers of success it's important to figure out what we care about for ourselves, and live according to our own values instead of pursuing predefined ideas of what being accomplished looks like.

While I am proud of every service award, championship win, and dream school admission my classmates have received those things aren't what makes them compassionate, athletic, or intelligent. The fact is the only thing we are truly capable of controlling is our own actions -- how hard we work and how honestly we work to get the things we want, what opportunities we choose to take, which ones we choose to leave, and perhaps most importantly. how good we are to the people around us.

For the rest of our lives it will be easy to ignore or repress the values we take for granted at GDS. In college, at work, as we try to progress in the world no one will be holding us accountable for doing what we know is right. There will be times for some or all of us when it is more convenient to disengage from a difficult conversation, to demonize those who disagree with us, or to put our own social or financial status above our moral obligation to others. My hope for us is that we not leave behind the belief that we are each accountable to more than just ourselves in high school. And that we remember how we got to know and care about one another despite our differences so that we are tolerant, forgiving, and open in the face of increasing insularity. My hope is that by holding ourselves to a higher internal standard we'll be able to create positive change and that our legacy will be that we left wherever we went better

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than it than was when we got there.

I brought up my first day of school because somehow graduating feels similar in that I once again have very little idea of what our collective futures will look like. The thing I am sure of, though, is that I'm going to hear and see again the names that are called out tonight. In art galleries, and on research papers, as the authors of books and the subjects of them. Since this is the last time we'll really ever formally be together with all of you forced to listen to me speak I want to take this opportunity to thank my class: you have given me the honor of representing you for these last few years and now again today. I spoke about different measures of success earlier and as far as I'm concerned the fact that a group of people I respect as much as I do this one trusts me to do justice to their feelings right now is likely the greatest accomplishment of my high school career. Thank you for believing in me and showing me what it feels like to truly belong. And congratulations. Honestly I'm scared to leave but outside this building the world is waiting and there's a new path full of new possibilities stretching out before each and every one of us. So as hard as it is to say goodbye it's equally exciting, because I can't wait to see where we go. Thank you.