



# High School Graduation

June 9, 2019

Speech by Marjory Brimley, High School Faculty

Welcome families, friends, teachers, and graduates. To the class of 2019: thank you for inviting me to speak. I'm so lucky to be here.

And so are you. You made it past this first big finish line: high school graduation. You wrestled with the complicated history of feminism with Julie. You explored your identity through art with Michelle. You learned about biogeochemical cycles from CA. And now, you're getting ready to start the rest of your life.

While I'm hopeful for all of you, I can't predict your future. I don't know whether you'll major in engineering or graphic design. I don't know who you'll marry (or whether you'll get married) and I don't know if you will come back to DC to settle down or spend your life traveling the world. The future, in so many ways, is unknown. I can't predict it.

But there is something I can almost guarantee.

Bad things will happen to you.

I know. It's not exactly what you expected me to say. I think I'm supposed to say something like, "the future is as bright as your dreams." And that may be true.

But I also know this – you're likely to face something truly terrible in your life.

I'm not talking about a B minus. I'm talking about the real world – the one where things often don't go your way. The one where things are hard and sometimes unhappy.

Maybe you have already faced a major hardship. Maybe you weren't sure if you'd walk across this stage today. Maybe you battled an illness – physical or mental – that made it difficult to get out of bed every day. Maybe you experienced a loss that shook the very foundation of your

family.

Or maybe you haven't yet. Gosh, I hope you haven't yet.

Either way, I'm here to tell you this – the future holds so much promise. But the future also holds the potential for great hardship.

As most of the people on this stage know, but some in the audience might not, my husband Shawn died suddenly last year from colon cancer. He was 40. In an instant, I became a young widow with three kids under 9. I didn't come to work for months. I barely got out of bed during that time. I retreated into my safe space, the one where I gave into my emotions and didn't allow anyone to truly console me. For months, I left this world.

But eventually, I had to face reality. I came back to work at GDS. I went to events at my kids' school. I put on a brave face and when I'd see someone in the hallway or at the grocery store, I'd smile.

"How are you?" a colleague or an acquaintance might ask.

"I'm goooooood!" I'd say.

I rarely meant it.

I oscillated between covering at home, alone, and greeting everyone with a smile out in public. Of course, sometimes, I'd fail at this, and instead of a smile I'd start inappropriately sobbing with the cashier at CVS, which always freaked people out. "It's okay!" I'd say. "My husband just died so I do this sometimes!" Then I'd watch the person slowly step further away from me.

Because the world tells us to look away from grief, doesn't it? That's why we admire people who come to work and put a smile on their face and say they are "doing great!" Do you know what we call people like that?

We call them strong.

But I think we have to start imagining strength in a different way. Is it really strong to deny your emotions and just barrel through life? Is it really strong to face adversity and continue to always

have a smile on your face?

Or is there another way we can think about all of this?

I certainly hope so. Because, as I noted, you're likely to face something bad in your future. I hope it's nothing as terrible as losing a spouse – but you may lose a job or end a really important relationship. You may find yourself on the wrong career path or you may have to move to a place where you don't know anyone. You may feel alone.

And in those moments, it may seem like you have two choices. You can give up, retreat into your sadness and your room and cover yourself in tears. OR you can “be resilient,” pull yourself together and do your best even when things are the worst.

But what if there's an alternative? What if instead of retreating into pain, on the one hand (gesture), or “being strong,” on the other (gesture), you can do something else?

What if, instead, you reached out? What if when you faced that bad thing – that terrible adversity – you asked for support from the dearest people that surrounded you?

What might this look like?

Well, graduates, I can tell you, because in one of my darkest moments, you did it for me.

It was January of this year, the 1-year anniversary of Shawn's death. I decided to “be strong” and come to work, but once I got there, I struggled with how I was going to make it through. It was a Wednesday, and by the time I got to my 5th period Comparative Government class, I was barely holding it together. I tried to teach about the failed states index and I think I was part-way through describing Somalia when I started openly crying in front of all of you in that class.

And you stayed in that moment with me. Maybe you didn't know what to do. Maybe a teacher has never cried in front of you.

But here's the key point: you didn't run away. You sat there with my pain and you let me cry and afterwards many of you said something kind to me. Some of you didn't know what to say – and that's okay – but you still looked at me as you left, telling me with your eyes that you were

thinking of me.

And do you know what I felt? I felt loved. By my students and by GDS. But I could not have had this moment if I didn't first let you in. If I didn't first say, "here is my pain. Please see it."

So, yes, I'm telling you that in the future you will face something hard. Maybe something really hard. But I will also tell you this: when I faced the worst possible thing, I was not actually alone.

And you won't be either.

Class of 2019, I want you to find someone special out there in the audience or on the stage, or close your eyes and think of someone who can't be here. It might be a parent or a sibling or a teacher. Make eye contact with that person if you can. I'm going to pause here for just a moment.

Now, I want you to remember this moment when things get hard. That person – the one you made eye contact with or thought about – that person is someone who will support you when things get hard.

But I want you to remember something else. There are dozens of people who surround you right now. Who love you. Who don't want you to suffer alone or pretend to be okay when you're not. These people are your community.

Now, here's the audience participation part. I want everyone here to reach out to the people sitting around you (and it's okay if you'd rather just do this in your mind.) You can put your arm around a friend, offer a stranger a hand to hold, or hold someone in your heart. Okay, so is everyone doing that? Keep holding on.

Graduates, this is your community. This is your web of support. And everyone here is saying the same thing: "we got you."

I want to hear you say it, audience! (I'll say it, and then point to you and you can say it.)

"We got you!"

“We got you!”

“We got you!”

Because what we have in this life is each other.

So at some time in the future when things are going badly, I want you to remember how many people are here, ready to catch you if you fall.

Tell your story. Listen to others. Share your lives with those around you and get through pain together.

And don't forget: We got you.