



High School Graduation

June 9, 2019

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Graduates, you may be seated.

Good afternoon and welcome to the 48th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2019. We are so lucky to be here--to share together in a milestone for these young people.

Communities come together to mark transitions--moments when individuals move from being one thing to another. From being single to married at a wedding. From life to death at a funeral. From being a child living at home, to being an adult in the world at a graduation. Each of these evokes different emotions. For graduations, we feel pride, hope, possibility...and a sense of loss. Graduates...you may feel a sense of loss that you're no longer going to be able to spend your days alongside these fabulous classmates and these talented teachers and this loving family. Parents...you certainly may be feeling loss at the prospect that these young people are moving on to a new stage...one where their days and nights and weekends will unfold even more independently from you than they do now. As parents, we love these young people with everything we have, and then they leave....and we celebrate and mourn at the same time. And parents, I'll let you in on a secret. As educators, WE, your children's teachers, FALL in love with these amazing young people and then they leave. While we get more practice with navigating the loss we feel, we still feel it.

But of course we stay connected, just in a new way. Graduates--as you look out at your fan section--know that these people, who have known you the longest, who know you the best, will stick with you when things are hardest. And of course that's not only true for the people facing you. It's also true of the people next to you. Your GDS classmates will remain your confidantes, your advisors, your dearest friends.

I'd like to name something unusual about today's program. Each year, you the seniors vote to select our two student speakers and our faculty speaker. Separately, the high school leadership

team and I confer to determine a parent speaker from among the parent body of the graduating class. These two processes unfold concurrently but don't speak to each other. And this is the first time since 2002, when Sandy and Philip Ungar both spoke both spoke at GDS graduation, that our parent speaker and one of our student speakers are related. In this case, you should all know that when William Goldberg was elected as one of the student speakers, he came to me and said, "Russell, I can give up my spot--I mean, it's such a big day for my dad." Ultimately William and I decided that he would go ahead with his talk but that he would intentionally underperform so as not to show up his father, a remarkable act of generosity by a soon-to-be GDS alumnus.

A GDS tradition for the past decade is that I ask seniors to write me what they're taking with them as they leave GDS. I received far too many responses from your class to share today and I'm only able to share a brief sampling of what you wrote. Thanks to each of you for your thoughtful responses-some of which came in last night...which leads me to wonder if one thing you'll be taking with you is time management.

So, Class of 2019, what will you be taking from GDS?

Emma Leary writes:

It was many years at GDS before I realized how curious the outside world is and how negative it can sometimes be. I am a student of color, I was adopted, I have two gay dads and a sister from another continent. From PK on, GDS opened its arms to me and my family. It didn't just teach tolerance; it taught me and my classmates to celebrate difference. I've been at GDS for fourteen years now and though some complain about the GDS bubble, for me, it was such a privilege to grow up this way. I would never have gotten this love and celebration anywhere else. Every pride assembly where I could stand up and yell "That's my family!", learning about Vietnamese culture through "The Gangster We Are All Looking For" in English class, or even the simple acceptance of my peers and teachers have changed the way I perceive myself. GDS allowed me to explore my identity and gave me the strength to feel good about it. It wasn't until sixth grade that I first experienced a negative comment about my family. Sixth grade. I had lived the majority of my life knowing that my family was amazing and it's only because of GDS that I was able to stand up to that negativity and be confident and proud of who I am. GDS has taught me to take pride in myself and I know I am ready to face those who may be less accepting and

stand up for what I believe in.

Cole Wright-Shaner writes:

I will take with me the hideous “salmon”-colored tee-shirt that our class wore on First Friday in 10th grade. As much as I loathe it’s appearance, I take it with me everywhere. It reminds me of the enthusiasm the class of 2019 puts into every group activity. Bizarrely, it provides hope that our grade will continue to be unified even if separated by state lines, oceans, and so on. It is the only GDS merchandise I own (I will buy many more and contribute generously to the school’s capital campaign, I promise!) and I wear it with embarrassing pride.

Ellen Schlick writes:

There are so many things that I will take with me from GDS, but what stands out is what I will not take with me: self-doubt. I came to GDS freshman year constantly questioning myself and holding myself back from great experiences because I was scared to fail. Now, four years later, I am not afraid of the unknown, just excited!

Brion Whyte writes:

I will take away the importance of relationships. In my tenure at this school, I’ve made it my duty to ensure that I have a lasting relationship with the people I’m surrounded by because if I choose to avoid them, then my growth or possibly theirs will be hindered. I’ve received more opportunities than I would have ever imagined because of these relationships I’ve formed. I’m extremely grateful.

Mia Cuneo writes:

GDS has given me patience, determination, and drive. If a problem appears to be hard, I know that I have been given the tools to solve it. GDS has not only taught me how to solve a derivative or find an integral, it has taught me that sometimes neither works; some problems require me to think outside of the box. When this happens it is okay, because I know GDS has prepared me to overcome anything.

Danielle Soto writes:

My teachers have supported me through difficult moments, both within and outside the

classroom. The relationships I have with my teachers are built on trust and respect; the teachers create an environment that makes students feel valued, inspiring us to work better and harder. Being able to trust my teachers has given me the confidence to realize my potential. By forcing me to consider things through a new lens, GDS has helped me become more open-minded and empathetic.

Alex Carmen writes:

When you think you're rebelling against GDS, when you think you're disrupting the bubble, you're actually participating in the one thing that makes GDS stand out from the rest. GDS takes you in and helps you find you. GDS supports the wild artists, sophisticated scholars, and aspiring athletes. There are so many different worlds and networks that are thriving in this school. There truly aren't outcasts here; if you don't find a space for yourself at GDS, then you can make one. That's what I did. And I thank the school for supporting me. So, what will I take from GDS? If you are determined, you can be great. You just have to start somewhere, and the people who mean the most will be there at every step.

Frankie Galli writes:

My parents tell the story of how every day in PK I would come home in a different outfit than when I started the day because I didn't want to go to the bathroom and miss out on anything, so I didn't and I would have to change. All I can say is I have always loved this school...I am a GDS student because I am inclusive, hard-working, positive, resilient, and reliable.

Caroline Katsive writes:

I am leaving GDS speaking two more languages than I did when I entered, knowledgeable about far more subjects than I used to be, and able to analyze texts far more deeply than four years ago. But more importantly, perhaps, I am leaving as a better person and a better friend.

Zach Blank writes:

The most important thing that GDS gave me is a voice. Every class and social encounter at GDS has afforded me the opportunity to reflect on how I want to present myself to the world---how I want my voice to be heard. The English classes and newspaper meetings have produced the argumentative voice heard in my articles and essays. The relationships with teachers, older students and mentors have produced the helpful voice that I hope to share with younger students in the clubs that I run. The cookie runs and cross country meets have

produced the encouraging voice that my teammates can hear as I cheer for them during their races. And the jazz trips, classes and performances have produced the oftentimes out-of-tune voice of my solos on the saxophone. What's so special about this gift, unlike any other, is that I'll always have it with me. It's impossible to separate my voice from my experiences at GDS over the past nine years, and I am eternally grateful for that.

And Annalise Myre writes:

I remember when I toured GDS in eighth grade, it was Halloween. As I walked through the halls, trying to blend in so nobody noticed the eighth grader at the high school, I realized that GDS is not a place where people choose to blend in. From GDS, I will take with me memories, experiences and friendships with people who chose to stand out and were not afraid to show their peers and the world what they are passionate about.

I will take with me Bobby Asher's lessons in the importance of putting your phone down and talking with the people around you. I will take with me Marjorie Brimley's love for politics and international relations. I will take with me Julia Fisher's journalism ethics. I will take with me Richard Avidon's notable quotables and embarrassingly low quiz grades. I will take with me Andy Lipps' love for constitutional law and his passion for calculus. Whether it be sports, theater, social justice, the Augur Bit, debate, math team or even cardboard club, GDS fosters a community where every student is encouraged to be themselves and knows they have a support system rooting for them through success and failure. Having teachers like Tom Spilsbury, CA Pilling and Greg Dallinger who spend hours after school watching students play soccer, lacrosse or basketball is a true testament to how much the faculty cares about the students outside of the classroom and these relationships I will forever keep in my heart.

Now it may have been because it was Halloween, but as I toured GDS in eighth grade I felt an intangible energy radiating from the classrooms and forum. When I visited colleges, I found myself searching for schools that resembled GDS's energy. Places where students seemed happy and intellectually curious, while still being engaged with the world and a diverse group of people around them. I didn't know it at the time, but when I chose to come to GDS in eighth grade, I chose happy. Whenever I felt a challenge at school, the stress usually stemmed from the pressure I put on myself not the teacher who was only pushing me to become the best writer, historian or mathematician they believed I could be. Faculty like Amy Killy, Meg Blitzer, Topher Dunne and Catherine Pearson who spend their entire summers planning things like the

Policy Institute are the reason GDS students are so prepared to tackle society's most pressing issues.

As I prepare to leave GDS, I will take with me gratitude for having spent four transformative years at a school where if I ever fell down, a friend, teacher or coach would be there to pick me back up.

Seniors, it's a good set of things for your packing list. Brion-I hope you'll also take my cell phone number in case you need to tell me to call a Snow Day. At your graduation rehearsal, I gave you each one more thing to take with you from GDS--a book. Educated is a remarkable memoir by Tara Westover, a woman who grew up in Idaho to survivalist parents. Westover and her siblings didn't go to school, they didn't see doctors...some of them didn't even have birth certificates. Her parents hoarded food and gasoline in underground bunkers in preparation for the apocalypse. Through a remarkable act of will, Westover determines that she will educate herself, against her parents wishes, making her way first to the local library and then to Brigham Young University and, ultimately, to Cambridge and Harvard.

I found Westover's story especially compelling in a year in which we learned that some high school seniors had made their way into colleges through "side doors", by purporting that they excelled in sports that they didn't actually play or submitting test scores for tests they hadn't taken.

Of course the great tragedy of the Varsity Blues Scandal is how families acted unethically to use their privilege to perpetuate privilege, shedding important light on some of the broader inequities at play in college admissions and beyond. My hope is that GDS has taught you to question these inequities, and to commit yourselves to building a more just world.

Another tragedy, however, and one that has gotten less attention, is that the young people at the center of this scandal were deprived of the ability to author their own stories. The contrast between Westover's story and those of the young people who had their college story written for them is striking. Seniors, when you tell us you're leaving GDS with voice, with confidence, with skills and determination and empathy, you tell us that you're ready to author your own stories--in fact you've already begun to do so. Far more important than the college you are each headed to after GDS is the story that you can tell yourself about your journey. You are choosing to write

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your own story rather than have someone else write it for you. This matters much more than a standardized test score or college bumper sticker.

Class of 2019, as you head off to college and beyond, I'm confident that you have everything you need to take with you. And I know I speak on behalf of all of your teachers when I say that we love you. We believe in you. And we are very, very proud of you.

Closing:

I'd like to take this last opportunity to say, on behalf of the faculty, staff, and administration of Georgetown Day School, a final congratulations to both the graduates and the family and friends who have helped us arrive at this moment.

And now, Class of 2019, I want to invite you to be present, to pause and look around, face your parents, faculty, family and friends—look at all these people who have showed up for you today. Collectively, we are for you, we believe in your tremendous capacity, we are proud of you. And to the rest of us here—our responsibility for these graduates does not end today. These talented young people will need our ongoing support and guidance as they discover the world, make their way in the world, and change the world. Our work isn't done.

In closing, a poem by Mary Oliver called "The Summer Day". Along with caps & gowns, the reading of this poem is a tradition I began last year. I'm calling it a tradition because I think it's a perfect send off for our Mighty Hoppers:

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Class of 2019, may you encounter joy, growth and blessing in your one wild and precious life.
You have our confidence, our support, our love, and our profound hope for the road ahead.