



High School Graduation

June 8, 2014

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon. It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the 43rd commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2014. Today we are privileged to celebrate these tremendous young women and men and to send them on their way.

Graduates: Here we are at last. The Big Day. I want you each to take a moment to try to conjure up your first day at GDS. Remember how big the school seemed? Remember how big the seniors looked? They were adults. They were rock stars. They were these fully formed human beings. And now ... they are you.

Take a moment to look back on your journey. How has GDS changed you? Several weeks ago, I wrote to you and asked you what you'll take with you from GDS. You emailed me a wealth of answers, far too many to share here. So here's a brief sampling:

Kira Schulman is taking the courage to ask questions. She writes:

I moved to America in 5th grade from London, England. In London, I went to a very typical British school. We wore uniforms. We addressed teachers as "Ms." and "Mr." There was very little diversity. And it was strict. So strict that at the age of seven, I convinced myself that it was best to just be silent when teachers were in the room to avoid getting in trouble.

So, when I came to America and began GDS it was a shock. I remember walking into Judy Brown's 5th grade classroom on the first day to a sea of students running around yelling and hugging each other after a long summer holidays apart. The kids were addressing each other's parents by first name. And then ... they were addressing "Ms. Brown" as Judy.

The first few weeks were hard. I sat in the back of the classroom keeping silent most of the time as I was used to doing. But I watched how the other kids acted. Everyone seemed to really want to be here. They spoke up and expressed their opinions in class and even disagreed with the

teacher sometimes. Over the years at GDS, I have been slowly shedding my British schoolgirl identity and finding my own.

What I will take from GDS above all is the knowledge that I do not always need to confine myself within the rules. To be clear, I am not taking from GDS that it is ok to be a criminal. (And Kira—I, for one, am delighted to hear that). But, it is OK to test the lines and more important to question the lines. I am taking from GDS that it is not OK to just accept things as they are. GDS says it wants students to love learning. But I think what GDS ultimately instilled in me along with a love of learning is a curiosity and a need to question and understand. I will go off to Penn next year not as the quiet girl in the back of the classroom but as the student in the front of the classroom, participating, asking questions, engaged.

Mark Ashin is taking his books. He writes:

GDS allowed me to fall in love with literature, and as I write this I'm looking at the stack of novels that changed my whole perception of books and reading. My fascination and, frankly, obsession with literature was sparked by the GDS English department, and when I finally leave this place behind I know I'll be taking my books with me.

Fatima Fairfax is taking community. She writes:

As an entering freshman I was extremely hesitant to change schools. From the moment I stepped inside GDS however, I could see myself immersed in the school's culture; sitting in the chaotic forum, staying in the building for all hours of the night and on weekends, talking to teachers in the hallways. The communities built from sports teams, music groups, and the class of 2014 shaped my time here. I want to keep this community long after high school, a community that goes on beach trips, dominates men's volleyball and is so musically, athletically, and academically talented that we can't not be successful. I hope I never lose the ideas and ideals and people that make up the communities I've found at GDS.

Aaron Fisher is taking curiosity. He writes:

I will take from GDS an interest in those around me. In my many years at the school, I not only learned about other people through the countless books I read in class and historical figures I studied, but also through theater at the High School, where I learned the challenges of working hard and having fun while trying to portray someone who is not me. I will take (I actually did take) from GDS the crucifix necklace I wore in the musical, because GDS allowed me to finally

become a Catholic priest, a calling traditionally unattainable for a nice Jewish boy.

Jack McIsaac writes:

I will take two Expo markers, a highlighter, 74 "great jobs" from Harold Newton, and the belief that I can handle anything that college—or life—throws my way.

Emily Vogt will be taking a love of learning with her. She writes:

I will be taking a GDS mind to college: a mind that has been whittled and shaped by my peers, teachers, and coaches over the past nine years. A mind that never takes any idea for granted, and is always primed to question. A mind that opens itself to other voices and other perspectives, but that never loses sight of its own. A mind that loves to learn. And learn. And learn some more. I will be around other students next year who have taken more APs than I have, who have perhaps started their own non-profit organization, or who have even led their sports teams to National Championships. But, despite their notable accomplishments, they don't have that same love of learning that I do, a love which I owe entirely to GDS and a love which will last me a lifetime. How could I not love learning after being surrounded for the past nine years by teachers who spend their snow days looking up different TED talks to weave into our class discussions and who use Aretha Franklin's song "Chain, Chain, Chain" to help their Calculus students remember the Chain Rule? How could I not love learning after being part of a diverse student body where everyone is encouraged to voice their own opinion? GDS makes this love of learning contagious; we all seem to leave with a GDS mind, primed to impact the world with the same general premise but in strikingly different ways. And it is this GDS mind that will keep us connected to the institution, that will keep drawing us back for alumni events or lunches with teachers, because we want to stay close to those who harbor that same love of learning and who helped to shape our love of learning. In short, GDS has helped me change not just the way I think, but the way I think about myself.

Sydney Morris is taking her voice. She writes:

GDS has taught me to have an opinion, and to fight for it. My voice matters. I came into Elaine and Joanna's class on the first day of kindergarten excited to make friends, but I had no idea I would have friendships that would last for 13 years. Thank you teachers and administrators for giving me the best school environment I could have asked for. You all pushed me further than I thought I could go and helped me to be my best self.

Sam Klein will take with him an appreciation for diversity. He writes:

Everyone knows that our school was established on pillars of diversity. Many schools emphasize diversity in their mission statements, but what distinguishes GDS is that our diversity isn't just the breakdown of who's in the classroom—it's represented in the discussions themselves. The incredible diversity of backgrounds of students, faculty, and guest speakers at GDS in conjunction with the often-underappreciated encouragement for everyone to speak their mind means that not only is there a diversity of people in the room, but a diversity of opinions as well. I'll leave the school with a strong appreciation for communities like this one, and in the rare times in my life when I find myself in such an environment I'll be sure to take full advantage of the broad perspectives surrounding me.

Lily Gasperetti will take with her “the drive to work diligently, the desire to try new things, knowledge, amazing friendships, and words of wisdom from teachers, including: ‘You can't truly love someone before you learn to love yourself’ and ‘Never eat at Jack in the Box!!’ ”

Holly Morgan writes:

I cannot possibly express all the ways that GDS has been perfect for me. Through GDS theater I learned how to run, build and design a show. This taught me responsibility and leadership in a hands-on, active and real-life way. We learned how to work under pressure and, through this, how to gain self-confidence and self-worth. At GDS, our teachers don't look down on us. They teach us and treat us as equals. GDS stands for Greatest Damn School. I will miss it dearly, but I know that it has prepared me to confidently step into my new college life.

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 love of learning, an appreciation for diversity, and, last but certainly not least, a strong voice.

On Wednesday at your graduation rehearsal, I added one more thing to your list, when I gave you each a book, Andrew Solomon's, *Far from the Tree*. The book explores a number of rich themes, perhaps most powerfully the theme of identity. Like our School's founders, Solomon is an anthropologist, and believes we learn from engaging different voices and life experiences. And Solomon has the right approach to his different subjects—he's curious, nonjudgmental, and

not too politically correct. Solomon understands that while he may carry his own prejudices into his encounters with difference, he is, in the words of one reviewer, “only too willing to have them demolished.”

It heartens me that even with your end-of-year business and various graduation parties to attend, a number of you have found the time to begin reading your new book. A few days ago, I received the following note from one of your classmates, **Natalie Edwards**.

She wrote:

Thank you for the book you gave each of the seniors. I admit to only having read the first chapter but I am already enthralled by it. I spent my senior quest reading one book a week for every week of the second semester. Yet, this book is very different from the "classics" I have been reading such as Catch-22 and On the Road.

Only at GDS would the seniors receive a 900-page book for graduation. And only at GDS would there be seniors who are really excited about this. (My friends have already been asking me if I've started "the book" yet.)

I've been thinking about GDS a lot lately. At St. Stephen's, the school I attended last year for my junior year abroad in Italy, I realized for the first time how profoundly GDS had shaped me. I realized that I took for granted close friendships with each of my teachers and I assumed that every student would be as enthusiastic about school as I was. I got a little bit of a shock. I enjoyed the year I spent in Italy. I learned about a new culture and made a lot of new friends from all over the world. But, when I look back in ten years at my adolescent years, I know that GDS is the school I will remember as the place that made me who I am. My GDS kindergarten teachers must have been taken aback by my somewhat bossy nature. I told the other kids at my lunch table each day that we were going to play "the silent game" and that at the end of the year I would hand out awards to the winners—a plot to allow myself to dominate lunchtime conversation. While my teachers let me continue with my diabolical ways, they did urge me to use the "Peace Rose" more than once. At any other school, my teachers would have rushed to "put me in a box" and would have attempted to tame my more unruly habits. Fortunately, GDS let me figure out on my own that bossing other kids around wasn't the best way to get what I wanted or to cultivate lasting friendships. That's what progressive education is all about, isn't it? Progressive education is child-centered, where the teacher is not a taskmaster but rather a

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guide who lets kids become who they are meant to be and allows us to learn from our peers without always standing over us and telling us how to behave. I'm so grateful for the chance that GDS gave me to figure it out on my own sometimes.

And now, we come back to "the book." That's what Far from the Tree is about—it's a book that showcases different identities and argues for a more restrained approach to parenting—or at least a more humane one, one that allows children to form their own identities and be proud of them.

On that note, of course GDS hasn't been the only guiding figure in my life (I do have two loving parents), but it's perhaps been the most profound; especially because, as I grew and my life changed, GDS didn't. GDS has been my home for all these years and even though I chose to explore something different last year, I was able to make that choice happily and with much excitement because I knew that for my senior year, I would be returning to the place I loved the most.

Seniors, we count on all of you returning to GDS often. For those of you who spent your early years on MacArthur Boulevard, this may mean returning to a unified GDS campus on Davenport Street. (And yes—we're very, very excited). And yet know that while our school has had seven different campuses in our 68 years, you will still be returning, like alumni before you, to GDS. To a GDS that understands that young people should be at the center of their learning, that knows that diverse learning environments are superior learning environments, that believes deeply in each child's unlimited capacity, in his or her unique genius.

And now, I close with a story.

A group of villagers travelled several days to visit the big city. They stayed in an inn and spent their days marveling at the sites and the sheer numbers of people they saw. On their last night in the inn, they awoke to the sound of drumming. The innkeeper shouted that they should quickly leave their rooms and gather outside. When they did so, they asked the innkeeper what was happening. He explained to them that the drums meant there was a fire somewhere in the city that needed to be put out. After a while of standing outside listening to the drums, they were allowed to return their rooms and go back to sleep.

When they returned to their village, the travellers were asked about their visit to the city. They shared stories of big buildings and busy commerce, and, most memorably, of being awoken in the middle of the night by drums. Upon hearing this last story, the village's elders decided to buy a drum for every household in the village.

Several months later, there was a fire in the village. And the villagers all stood in front of their homes and beat their drums. And while they were beating their drums, the village burned to the ground.

Class of 2014, today's graduation is a celebration and marks of an important transition for each of you. It is also, however, just the beating of drums. There are still a lot of fires burning out there. They need your skill, your talent, your character, your courage to put them out. The world needs you. We are counting you. We believe in you. And we are very, very proud of you.