



High School Graduation

June 8, 2014

Speech by William Treanor, Parent Speaker

Russell, C.A., Faculty and Staff of the Georgetown Day School, Parents, Grandparents, Siblings, Friends, and, above all, members of the Georgetown Day School graduating Class of 2014.

It is a privilege to be here, marking this great day in your lives. I am pleased to be accompanied by my wife, Allison, and my daughter, Katherine, and I am honored to be speaking on behalf of all the parents, who are so proud of you, our graduates.

I recognize that the most deeply honored tradition at GDS is that no tradition is honored. We just saw it here: I don't think there is another graduating class in the world that enters to the sounds of the *Pink Panther*. But one tradition of high school graduation speeches will be continued today: no one will remember this speech.

I have a friend who recently gave a law school commencement speech and he was very nervous. His son, who is a doctor, reassured him, saying, "Not only will no one remember your speech, I don't remember who any of my graduation speakers were."

And his father said: "You graduated from high school, from college, and from medical school, and you don't remember who any of your speakers were?"

The son said: "Not a clue."

And the father said: "I was your high school graduation speaker."

So, Liam, please pay attention.

Most of my career has been in legal education, and law school classes typically don't involve lectures; they use Socratic questioning. There is an hour of back and forth of challenging hypotheticals, without any answers. At the end of the class, however, I like to take a minute and

say: these are the four key points from this class. There is no significance to the number four; it just always seems to work out that way. And that is what I would like to do here. Members of the graduating class, as you get ready to leave GDS, I know you have learned a great deal about many subjects, but I would like to talk about four life lessons that GDS teaches, and then, I would like to make a final request on behalf of all the parents.

First, do good.

While that might be a standard piece of advice at any high school graduation, at GDS, it is particularly appropriate. This is a school that has a commitment to justice in its DNA.

GDS began because Aggie O'Neill knew segregation was immoral, and she founded GDS, the first integrated school in Washington, D.C.

And, for almost 70 years, graduates of this school have used the lessons they learned here to make the world a better place. To give you a few examples of people who not so long ago walked across this stage to receive their diplomas: Because Laura Spero '98 created Eva Nepal, 18,000 people in rural Nepal have received dental care. Ian Yaffe '05's work at Mano en Mano has helped immigrants and farmworkers in Downeast Maine get the housing and education they need. Dickson Chan '07, Program Director of the Aslan Project, has fought childhood cancer in the developing world. And because Nick Cuttriss and Jesse Fuchs-Simon, Class of '98, started AYUDA, children around the world have learned how to lead happier and healthier lives with diabetes.

It is a stunning list, and I have picked just a few among many. GDS is a school dedicated to educating graduates who will make the world a better place. I hope you carry on that great tradition.

In the years ahead, you may do it in different ways—as doctors, lawyers, business people, journalists, activists, filmmakers, teachers, and as parents, friends, spouses, siblings—but you will each have the capacity to help others. And when you teach a child, or bring a story of injustice to the attention of the world, or mentor someone who needs guidance, or hire someone who just needs a chance to get ahead, you help not only that person, but all the people whose lives are touched by that person. When you help one person, you are helping a world of people.

And, so, do good or, to paraphrase the advice that Anthony gives our track and cross-country teams, in the race of life, run good.

Second, don't be afraid. GDS is a school that inspires you to try new things, even though you may not succeed. In fact, one of the goals in the strategic plan is: Teach students to take risks, tolerate failure, learn from failure.

We all fail in our lives. I don't want to be autobiographical here, but my mother, Peg, is in the audience, and she can probably fill you in at the reception.

We all pursue goals that we do not reach. What GDS does is to create a secure environment for people to try new things. You are encouraged to stretch in your classes, as you pursue subjects that are novel and difficult, and in sports, where you try new activities. I have seen your fearlessness in the art and photographs on the walls and in the adventurous literature in Grasslands. I have seen it in the cabarets where people who have never sung alone in public, close their eyes and then sing in front of a room full of classmates and are cheered.

GDS has taught you to be unafraid.

Many of the places you will go to in the years ahead may not be supportive in the way that GDS is, but I urge you to continue to be unafraid.

Let me tell you a story about resiliency. In 2000, Barack Obama was an Illinois State Senator who taught part-time at the University of Chicago Law School. He ran for Congress and was defeated, badly. Many of his friends thought his political career was over.

At a political fundraiser after the defeat, Geoff Stone, the Dean of Chicago Law School, went up to him and said, "I can't believe you're doing this. Why not settle down and be a law professor?" . . . Obama responded, "I really have to do this. I think I can make a difference. I've got to try."

Dean Stone looked at his friend, who had been President of the Harvard Law Review, someone who could have been a rich law firm partner or a leading legal scholar, someone who had just lost a disastrous electoral bid but who, rather than giving up, was trying again because he "thought he could make a difference." Stone looked at Obama, reflected on his friend's

determination to persevere against all the odds, and he thought to himself:

“What a putz.”¹

So try. As noted educator Ms. Frizzle of *The Magic School Bus* so memorably said: Take chances, make mistakes, get messy.

Don’t be afraid of failing. If you never fail, you have not risked enough.

When you fail, you may pick yourself up and become President of the United States. You may transform the world. Or you may never reach your goals. But, regardless of whether you succeed or fail, you will transform yourselves into the person you dream of being.

And don’t give up because your friends think you are a “putz.”

Third, look out for each other. When you come into the upper school building, the first thing you notice is the backpacks scattered everywhere. It is a small thing, but I have never seen anything like it. It shows the faith you all have in each other, and the care you have for each other is the stuff of your daily lives. You see it in so many ways. You cheer for each other at musicals and dance recitals, and choir performances, and debate competitions, and *It’s Academic*. You hug each other at athletic events, win or lose. This is a community that rallies together in times of loss, and that celebrates with joy when one of you succeeds. And this is a community where everyone—faculty, staff, students, everyone—is on a first-name basis. You are so much like a family. You leave GDS today, but I hope the ties that you have formed here will last, and that, as the years ahead brings sadness as well as successes, you will continue to cherish and care for each other.

Fourth, have fun.

Let’s go back in time.

As you prepare to leave GDS, think about what brought you here.

You didn’t come to GDS because it has a great football team . . . or a good football team . . . or any football team. You didn’t come to GDS because of the delicious food in the cafeteria. You

didn't come to be inspired by the rolling hills of the campus or the stunningly beautiful Gothic architecture, or because of the exquisite quality of the acoustics in the gym during the assemblies, or the efficiency of the drop-off and pick-up at the lower school, or to pal around with members of the first family, or because of the terrifying ferocity of the mascot.

And, if one or two of you came here for any of these reasons: I am so sorry. You must be so glad that it is almost over.

You came for the academics—but there are other schools that have great academics.

You came because this is a school with a great heart and a commitment to making a difference.

And I think you came here because this is a school that realizes that it is important not only to be serious, but to have fun. Senior Run In, Senior Prank, and Twin Day, and Powderpuff, and First Friday, celebrating Halloween, and the memorable faculty flashmob. This is a school that is irreverent and that treasures a sense of humor.

Now, as you prepare to leave GDS, you may be feeling sad because you realize that the years ahead will not bring you another Senior Run In, Senior Prank, or Twin Day, or Powderpuff, or First Friday. You may never again see a faculty flashmob.

But I hope that you have learned here that, while you have a moral obligation to pursue the serious work of the world, you can find joy in that work. I hope you have also learned that you can be both morally serious and irreverent and that you should seek the humor in life and the joy in friendship.

So, have fun. In a world of pomp and circumstance, may you always march to the beat of the Pink Panther.

And, while there will not be a final exam, let me summarize the four life lessons of GDS:

Do good.

Don't be afraid.

Look out for each other.

Have fun.

Finally, I will close with parental special pleading: ***call home***.

You didn't hear any of the other speakers remind you to call home on a regular basis, and I wouldn't have expected them to. But I am here representing the parents. Parents in the crowd—parents, you are my peeps—and, so, I am reminding you, graduates, to do what every parent here wants you to do. I am not the first parent speaker in GDS's history to remind graduates to call home, and I won't be the last.

We, your parents, have known you since before you were born. We heard your first words. We saw your first steps. We dropped you off for your first day of school. We read you stories, watched you play sports, helped you with your homework, argued with you, taught you, learned from you, watched you grow into extraordinary adults. We have seen you every morning, as you hurry off to school, and we have, more than once, worried until you came home late at night.

This chapter of your life—and ours—was a chapter that, in our hearts, we thought would never end. But today it draws to a close as you graduate from GDS and prepare to leave home.

You will always be the center of our lives.

But you will never again be the center of our days.

And we will miss seeing you, every morning and every evening.

So call home.

Congratulations to the Class of 2014. We are so proud of you, and we love you.

Thank you.

¹ David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, 359-60.