



High School Graduation

June 10, 2012

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon. It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the forty first commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2012. Today we are privileged to celebrate these tremendous young men and women and to send them on their way.

Graduates: I will not be the first to remark upon the fact that you are a remarkable class—in fact, you've told me this yourselves. As seniors, you set a tone for GDS, and we as adults could not have asked for a better tone to be set. Your voice, leadership, talent, passion, integrity, and deep commitment to our mission have enriched our school community and set a high bar for those classes that will come after you.

There are so many moments, I know, for each of you, that will embody your GDS experience, and so many moments, for us, that have helped to define you as individuals and a group. Your astonishing choral, theater & dance performances. Your championships in soccer, cross country, volleyball, and track & field. Your national prowess in math, debate, quizbowl, and more. Your stunning visual art. Not to mention the fact that you were pretty good students. But I want to talk about a different moment, one that unfolded just a few weeks ago. The Flash Mob.

For those of you who have yet to see the viral video, three of our seniors (Annie Ottati, Chloe Rotenberg, & Selin Odabas-Geldiay) decided to try something different for their Senior Quest, the project with which they conclude their GDS experience. They secretly plotted with our High School faculty for a memorable send off gift to the GDS community. Through weeks of top-secret rehearsals, they choreographed a dance and taught it to their teachers, a dance that would be performed in the midst of a GDS assembly.

The surprise worked beyond their expectations. During a presentation on security at the High School, music started playing, HS science teacher Martin Bullock started dancing, and soon

scores of teachers were moving in relative unity to “Call Me, Maybe.”

Of course, our High School students loved the performance. One said as the Flash Mob came to a close, “I can never be truly happy again because this was the happiest moment of my life.”

The faculty was transformed by the experience as well, saying that participating in the flash mob had done more to build authentic connections among colleagues than anything in the past decade.

And the Flash Mob had an impact beyond our campus, reconnecting many people to GDS. The video has been watched more than 3200 times (and counting) by current GDS community members but also by alumni from around the world. Many alumni, upon seeing the video, wrote to us to rave about a performance that recalled for them their own time at GDS & what it meant to be part of a uniquely wonderful school.

The Flash Mob was students teaching teachers, creating community, and extending community. It was building connections between people and helping people to see the world differently. And that, I would argue, is the GDS way.

As you embark from our community, seniors, and prepare to head off to college and your next adventure, I’ve been reflecting on what you’ll need for your journey, and what GDS has given you to take along. Several weeks ago, I wrote to you and asked you what you’ll take with you from GDS. I received a wealth of answers, far too many to share here. Here’s an abridged version:

Kiana Khozai writes:

I'll take a piece of candy from the college counseling office. I'll take a cool sweatshirt I discovered in the lost and found. I'll take the knowledge that Tony is always watching. But most importantly, I'll take a step towards the rest of my life with fourteen years worth of GDS weirdness in my back pocket. All those numbers and dates and formulas that we've crammed into our brains are going to allow the class of 2012 to build bridges one day. But it's the quirky confidence that GDS taught us outside of the classroom that's going to help us cross those bridges.

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School
June 10, 2012*

Kate Cullen writes of a Hopper lens. From Kate:

I will take a life-long love of learning and exploration. I will take perseverance and problem-solving from my math classes, curiosity from my science classes, open-mindedness and worldliness from my language classes, understanding and awareness from my history classes, analytical thinking from my English classes, creativity and collaboration from the arts, and finally, discipline and community from athletics. After thirteen years at GDS, these tools are a core part of who I am. On top of all that, GDS has provided me with a "Hopper lens" through which to view the world. This green "Hopper lens" tinges my view of the world with great compassion, a quest for quirkiness, an eagerness to build community, a spirit of inclusion, and an understanding of difference. The formation of these tools and the creation of this lens is entirely the product of my relationships with teachers, coaches, school administrators, and classmates.

With my GDS treasure chest of memories, tools, and a "Hopper lens" I have no doubt that I'll be able to walk on to a campus of strangers next fall and build myself another invigorating, illuminating, and incredible community.

Jesse Gainsburg writes of passion:

GDS has taught me about going after what you are passionate about. Within our class are elite debaters, quiz bowlers, athletes, actors/actresses, and artists. Not to detract from these individuals' abilities, but I believe that GDS has greatly facilitated their success.

Leah, Caitlin, and Andrija write about voice. **Leah Snider** will take from GDS:

...a newfound confidence in my opinion, because of the incredible teachers who have assured me time and time again that my voice matters, and now I believe it.

Caitlin de Lisser-Ellen will take:

The belief that "all you have to do is ask."

The world is not as mysterious as we have been led to believe, and if you are bold and take that first step, you will see results.

So in college, if I need something or I'd like to see something changed, I'll send that one email. I mean, it couldn't hurt.

Andrija Zuzul will take with him:

A counterargument.

Dan Samet writes of community and mistakes. From Dan:

GDS has shown me that if a community is to succeed it needs to recognize and honor what each individual brings to the table. Similarly, I will leave with the understanding that, even though many will inevitably disagree with me, it is vital to understand their positions. Acceptance and respect are about as pertinent to GDS as the color green.

GDS has also given me a space where it is OK to be wrong. Our teachers really encourage us to take risks and to step out of our comfort zones. I have concluded that it is healthy and beneficial to not get everything we want. It may be difficult, but it's worth it. Whether it is a grade or a girl, mysterious challenges await us at every turn. GDS is full of them, and I am so, so thankful to the school.

And finally, **Isaac Stanley-Becker** writes of his teachers:

My teachers made me feel as though what we were studying was the single most important thing in the world and inspired me to think, read, write, and be better. At the same time, they had the hearts to turn my gaze outward, to contemplate the world around me and consider my place in that world. It takes a special kind of teacher to impart knowledge of a well-crafted sentence or a pesky derivative while also doling out profound life lessons. GDS taught me history, math, French, and so on, and it taught me that well. But more important, GDS taught me new ways of thinking, new ways of asking, new ways of disagreeing, and new ways of arguing. New ways of being confused, new ways of being interested, and new ways of being curious.

I think this is fitting for a place that opened its doors as the first integrated school in a segregated city. Then, the act of learning served a vital political and social purpose. Today, GDS is still a place where education means so much more than a blackboard and some rows of desks. I've learned the most here in those chance encounters with a teacher sitting on the floor of the first floor hallway or that awkward moment when someone in class asks an off-topic and maybe even slightly inappropriate question, at 11 p.m. in the black box or at 5 a.m. on the way to a debate tournament.

These are the principal moments that I'll carry with me as I move onto college and beyond. I'll think about the intensity of Richard's explanation of Descartes and human existence and about the hilarity of Suzie's AP pep talks, while I reflect on a school with a soul that made me love learning and made me feel like I could do anything in the world.

Seniors, it's gratifying to know how much you'll be taking with you from GDS. Last week at graduation rehearsal, I added one more thing to your list, when I gave you each this book, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, a story of families from very different backgrounds and the community that they create together.

Smith's book is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, she began writing it while an undergraduate at Cambridge and published it when she was 23—a reminder to each of you that you are ready to make an impact, even now, and for many years to come. As you learned at GDS, however, this doesn't happen by itself. It takes lots and lots of hard work.

White Teeth is also noteworthy for the way it chronicles a world whose demographics are changing before our eyes, one in which we learned that for the first time this year in the United States, white babies were not the majority of those born. At GDS we know that who's here is changing, and who's here matters.

White Teeth describes a changing London, one in which Millat Ick-ball, the British born son of Bangladeshi immigrants, marries Irie Jones, the daughter of white Archie Jones and Jamaican Clara Bowden. Smith writes, "It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course." The book, while rife with the tensions that can arise from people with

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School
June 10, 2012*

very different backgrounds and experiences bumping up against each other, presents at its core an optimistic vision. It is a vision of a world in which we can be enriched and enlivened by our differences, in which we grow and are strengthened by multiple viewpoints and perspectives. It is, I would argue, a vision that is at the very foundation of GDS, a vision not of acceptance of the world as it is, but of the imperative to create the world as it could be.

Which brings me back to you, seniors. Your capacity for creating community allows you to bring disparate people together, as you did with the Flash Mob, building connections and extending those connections out into the world. Your “Hopper lens” allows you to see what’s uniquely valuable in different individuals, to appreciate the diversity that you encounter and be enriched by it. And your powerful voices will allow you to speak up against the world’s injustices and work to create a better world for all of us, one small step at a time.

Class of 2012, I want to invite you to be present now, to pause and look around, face your parents, faculty, family and friends—look at all these people who have showed up for you today. We are for you, we believe in your tremendous capacity, we are proud of you. We know that you will pack well, and that you have everything you need for the journey ahead.

And to the rest of us here, parents, teachers, family, friends—our responsibility for these graduates doesn’t 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. Class of 2012, you have our confidence, our support, and our profound hope for the road ahead.

Before we close this afternoon’s ceremonies, 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 I would also like to invite everyone present to take one last good look around. I invite you to **soak in this marvelous scene.**

Thank you all for being here to celebrate with us. Graduates: fare well, and come back and visit often.

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School
June 10, 2012*