



High School Graduation

June 13, 2011

Speech by Lanny A. Breuer, Parent Speaker

To Headmaster Peter Branch, members of the Board of Trustees, school faculty, parents, relatives, friends, Sam Breuer, and the other incredibly impressive graduates sitting before me, thank you for giving me the great privilege of addressing you today.

And what a day this is. You all are graduating! Can you believe it?! The day you probably thought seemed so far away when you started at GDS years ago is now upon us. The day your parents and relatives have been looking forward to with so much joy, love, anticipation—and, yes, sadness too—is here. Amazing!

As Assistant Attorney General, I tend to give a lot of speeches. But, believe me, talking about Mexican drug cartels or financial fraud is nothing compared to this. You see – this is my chance. This is my chance to speak not as a public official, but as a father—a father who will try his best not to embarrass his son, but who is also so bursting with pride and emotion that words really can't describe it.

This school is part of the fabric of the Breuer family, as I know it is part of all of yours. Nancy and I have been GDS parents for 13 years, with three more still to go. Over the years, we've seen our children and your children grow in every way imaginable. From the classroom to the athletic field, and everything in between, GDS has instilled in our children a deep sense of community, a profound respect for differences, and, perhaps more than anything, the courage to try – the courage to try new classes, new sports, new friendships, new perspectives, new experiences, new...well, just about anything. What a gift. What an education.

And, of course, it's not just all of our children who've grown. We, as parents, also have grown. Digging a latrine...or living as a colonist at Turkey Run...or picking ticks off other parents in Prince William Forest...or getting lost navigating a group of 8-year-olds on one of those adventures. Don't ask me which one—believe me, for a guy from Queens, these are all growing

experiences!

GDS, we know, is a place that forges the deepest of bonds. For the Breuers, those bonds have come through watching countless baseball and basketball games, handing out prizes at Country Market Day, or reading through the parent comments during the headmaster search process. For others of you, those bonds developed from attending opening night of the spring musical, helping out at a local soup kitchen, trekking to a debate halfway across the country, rehabbing a house desperately in need of repair, or keeping score at the quiz bowl tournament when you knew that you couldn't correctly answer even one lousy question!

Ultimately, though, what I'm sure we'll all treasure most about GDS is the warmth of the community and the friends we've made. Our home—like yours, I'm sure—has been filled over the years with so many GDS parents and students, giving us and our children the gift of close, meaningful, and enduring friendships. Fred, Galen, Jackson, Sam, Lexi, and others of you—you began as friends of Sam, but you now are really part of our extended family. Indeed, for all of us celebrating today's graduation, the relationships formed at GDS will not be fleeting connections long forgotten later in life. They will be lasting friendships, anchoring all that lies ahead.

Tragically, not everyone who should be here today is here today. The GDS community was shaken in 2002 by the death of Ethan Alperstein. Ethan was a classmate, teammate, and very close friend of Sam's—someone whose picture sits on Sam's desk to this day. The GDS community pulled together in that year of tragedy, and the beautiful garden in the lower/middle school dedicated to Ethan stands as a testament to that unity, as does the annual award for the fifth-grader who best embodies the qualities that we treasured in Ethan. This graduating class decided that its class gift would be used by the school for financial aid in Ethan's memory—a message to Ethan's parents, Lois and Les, and to the rest of the world, that Ethan will never be forgotten.

GDS became the first integrated school in the D.C. area when it opened its doors in 1945. It has since maintained a reputation as a progressive institution dedicated to providing an outstanding education to children of all cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, as well as sexual orientations. Behind any school like GDS you'll find a visionary, dynamic headmaster, and GDS has had such a headmaster for the past 14 years in Peter Branch.

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As you know, Peter is retiring, but his impact on the school will long be remembered. As headmaster, he presided over the expansion and modernization of the lower and middle schools and the high school, which required two major capital campaigns. Peter also wholeheartedly embraced and nurtured the school's historical commitment to diversity. Finally, and most important, Peter has built upon the school's record of academic excellence. You, the Class of 2010, are the beneficiaries of Peter's tireless efforts—and those who came before him—to safeguard the GDS mission of providing a top-notch, progressive education.

Peter, you will be greatly missed.

Peter, of course, did not labor alone. He—and you—have benefited from a truly unbelievable faculty. I think we can safely say that the teachers at GDS are among the most gifted you will find at any secondary school in the country.

Evan Smith—you probably could get even me, who barely made it out of high school Spanish, quoting from Virgil. C.A.—you lead a fabulous science department and could not be a more devoted to our children. Topher Dunn—you're not only an inspired history and psychology teacher, but also, as we discovered at the senior banquet, a mean bass player in snazzy white-and-brown bucs!

I really could go on and on because these and so many other teachers, coaches, counselors, and specialists at GDS have given their heart and soul to you, the students—working not only to develop you as scholars, artists, athletes, debaters, journalists, and musicians, but also to build character; to instill confidence; and to push you out of the box and outside your comfort zone.

So now, graduates, with this extraordinary education in your pocket, with all the friends you've made by your side, with the substantial love and investment—very substantial investment, I might add—by your parents and relatives, the question for you is: What are you going to do with it? How will you contribute?

I say “contribute” for a reason. Many of you enjoy great privilege in your lives. That privilege, along with this education, has put you on a path paved with opportunity. As your parents, we want you to seize that opportunity. We really do. But we also want you to remember that while, as Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.”

Give richly, graduates. Give of your time, of your intelligence, of your spirit, of your generosity, and of your love. Give because it's actually easy for you to do so. Give because not giving does a disservice to the education you've received and to the country that needs your service.

Now, when I say "service," I don't mean only government service. Although I will tell you, frankly, that government service is a wonderful way to give back to your country. I come to work excited every single day—excited to be serving the American people and feeling so privileged to be in a position to do so. But there are, of course, many other ways aside from government service to give back. Indeed, whether you choose to volunteer your time to a pro bono client, at a local homeless shelter, in a community medical clinic, at your local fire house, or in a sports league for disadvantaged youth, all I ask is that you do something! Do something that allows you to say, "I helped my community and my country today. I gave back."

Trust me, this country needs you more than you can know. This country needs leaders in every field and in every community who have had the kind of enlightened education that you've had; who can push for the values that this school holds so dear. That's how this country will keep moving forward.

Think about it. We moved in this country from racial segregation in the 1960s to the election of the first African-American president in 2008. How did we get there? Through courage, conviction, and enlightened perspectives—the kind of perspectives that GDS has nurtured in all of you.

The election of President Obama is, of course, an example of progress and opportunity on the grandest of scales. But there are many other examples—some right here in the GDS community.

My mother was a Holocaust survivor who was not allowed to attend high school by the German Nazi regime. Today, some 70 years later, she watches as her grandson graduates from one of the most prestigious secondary schools in the country, and her son, an Assistant Attorney General, delivers the school's commencement address.

Or how about your classmate, Ezekial Adigun? Ezekial's parents came to the U.S. from Ghana in the 1970s and have built a life in D.C. Ezekial's father, who was a teacher in Ghana, started

working in a parking garage here, before becoming a manager and then eventually a corrections officer at a halfway house. His mother first was a computer technician and now works as a nurse in a nursing home. Ezekial's GDS education has not come easy. Beginning in the first grade, he would be dropped at the home of a seventh-grader before taking two buses to school—a trip that took at least an hour and 15 minutes. Starting in fifth grade, at age 10, Ezekial did the trip alone. Two and a half hours of travel—and sometimes more—each day.

Ezekial is off to Harvard in the fall. I asked him what he thought was the most important attribute a person could have. And you know what he told me? Humility.

Yogi Berra once said, “The future ain't what it used to be.” Surely Yogi doesn't know anyone from GDS. I think our future could not be brighter in your hands. How could I be wrong? Whether it's medicine, education, engineering, finance, journalism, politics, law, or something else that, frankly, this lawyer-dad can't think of, you all will be the leaders in your fields if you want to be – and maybe even the leaders of this country.

But in getting there, remember what Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “Enthusiasm is the mother of effort, and without it nothing great was ever achieved.” I believe that. You all have so much potential in you—even greatness, in whatever form that takes—but you'll need enthusiasm to see it realized.

So find things to do that truly excite you, and find people to be with whom you love and respect. Take time to enjoy your lives. I'm a big believer in that. But, at the same time, please do not be lazy. Push yourself. Push yourself not only in your career, but also as a member of your community, as a spouse or partner, as a parent, as a friend...as a person. And every now and then, stop and ask yourself, “Am I reaching my potential? Am I giving back? Am I proud of who I am?”

And as you answer these questions throughout your life, remember that, as Abraham Lincoln said, “your own resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing.” Lincoln should know. Before he became President, he had had two failed businesses, six failed runs for elective office, a fiancée who died, and a nervous breakdown. You—hopefully—won't ever know such heartache, but whatever life has in store for you, you'll have your family, your friends, your mentors all there to prop you up—cheering you on, reveling in your successes, and lending a

helping hand whenever you need it.

Remember also the lessons you've learned here at GDS: the value of a top-notch education that is not only rigorous, but also thought-provoking, daring, and inspiring; the importance of celebrating differences, not because you think it's politically correct, but because you recognize the richness it will bring to your life; the joy that comes from teamwork and collaboration; the grounding you get from a strong sense of community and deep bonds of friendship; the excitement that comes from taking chances; the difference you make in giving back. These are the hallmarks of a GDS education. These are the beacons to guide you forward. And they will surely guide you well.

Congratulations, Class of 2010! We love you!