



High School Graduation

June 8, 2008

Speech by Joanna Rothkopf, Class of 2008

Good afternoon. Before I say anything else, I just want to take a moment to thank Peter, Kevin, the faculty, and all of you parents and friends.

A few weeks ago, on the last day of English class, our amazing teacher Louise [Brennan] sat us on the floor and read to us. The book she chose to sum up all our years at GDS was *The House at Pooh Corner*. She read to us about when Christopher Robin has outgrown Pooh and his other friends and is ready to leave them and the Hundred Acre Wood behind. Now, the idea that the culminating literary work of our GDS careers was Winnie the Pooh may seem a little disappointing for some of you...it might seem like we could have aimed a little higher, ending with a vigorous discussion of the works of James Joyce, Toni Morrison, or some other author with a little more heft, or at least some book with fewer pictures.

But for me, it was perfect. It was an ending that brought me right back to the beginning.

Fourteen years before, in pre-K, one of the very first things I remember doing at GDS was a production of Winnie the Pooh. I remember vividly the day the play was cast. My big break. My teacher, Elaine Ogden, carefully scanned all the kids in the room, looking us up and down. She took one look at me and apparently concluded, if there is one kid in this class is who perfect to play a clinically depressed donkey, it's that little Joanna Rothkopf. And so sweet cheerful little me was cast as Eeyore. But it gets worse. Because when I was little, I had a bit of a lisp. Okay, I had a lot of a lisp. And Eeyore...well, Eeyore's favorite things in the world were "thistles." "Thistle, thistle, thistle..."

Try that with a lisp. After 14 years, I still can't say it. Thanks a lot, GDS.

Now, of course, I'm pretty smart. I know what Louise was getting at. She read to us about a rite of passage, of Christopher Robin moving on to another phase of his life. But another thing that struck me was that just like Christopher Robin, we've all been on a kind of amazing journey full

of strange characters that has left us completely changed. Of course, that's undoubtedly true for every school and yet I can't help but feel that for every school it is also different. Every school has its own character, its own personality.

For instance, St. Albans, with all its ivy-covered walls and blue blazers, has its tradition...and, of course, National Cathedral has its Cathedral. Sidwell had Chelsea Clinton and Maret...well, Maret is, uhh...very near the zoo. And GDS...well, I was looking for the right word to describe GDS, and of course the first thing that comes to mind is "weird." But that's a little overdone around here—so what can I use? Last week, interim SSC president Julia Pockros classified GDS-like moments as "we would" moments. But this speech isn't about her—it's about me. And by that I mean it's about all of us. But who are we? What makes us different? What description catches that thing in GDS's DNA that makes us a breed apart? Would you call it "quirky?" Offbeat? Slightly odd? I don't know. However, it is clear that what sets GDS apart is not only that we're set apart but we're glad to be set apart. Of course, some of us are less like everyone else than others, but now is not the time to address that. You know who you are. I mean, for example, at your average high school I suspect there is not—as there is at GDS—a raging debate about whether we are even weird enough, whether we have lost our weirdness, gone soft...worse, gone mainstream. It is the GDS form of existential anxiety. We are weird therefore we are. Here it is 2008 and we still have a grasshopper as our mascot, think ourselves too good to give students extra GPA credit for little things like taking AP or honors classes, and still don't have a football team, cheerleading squad aside from Cheerquest All Stars, who were excellent, or even a cafeteria. We are hyper political, artistic, a little bit hippie forty years after the sixties, and constantly searching for new ways to make a statement.

Okay, I know some of you are sitting there at this point thinking "Hey! That's not me! I actually am actually pretty normal." But to that I respond with the words of Topher Dunne: "Cancel my subscription, 'cause I don't want your issues."

With all our quirks and characters, obsessions with maroon stripes and beautiful junk, sometimes things may seem a little crazy around GDS...but I would say no. Because as Robert Frost once said, "A civilized society is one which tolerates eccentricity to the point of doubtful sanity." So I would say by that definition that we are perfectly civilized...more than that, we are an example for everyone. We don't just tolerate eccentricity, we celebrate it. We don't just celebrate it. We grow it right here, providing a constant supply for Washington, DC, and for the

world.

Now, normal teenagers thrive on conformity. I know this not because I am normal, but because I have a TV. But I like to think of GDS as a kind of alternative universe, one in which we celebrate the out-of-the-box thinkers...even when, in the class of '06, it led a couple of boys to actually spend a week living inside a box as their senior quest. I guess they wanted to see what the rest of the world might be like. But this place has been fighting popular trends since the day it was started. After all, what could have been more conformist and widely accepted back in 1946 than the American-as-apple-pie idea of segregated schools?

So, GDS was born bucking a trend and here it is today—still celebrating its rich diversity every time we sing, in our gay pride assemblies and drag balls, and most important, in the wide range of ideas we cook up. What can you say about all this flagrant idiosyncrasy, all this rampant contrariness, all this bright green, mightily hopping GDosity? Well, all I can say is hallelujah!

The English philosopher John Stuart Mill once wrote “the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and the courage it contained.” Do you hear that? Every time you go out and do something unconventional, every time you say the thing no one else dares to say, every time you color outside the lines, you are a genius—a brave, vital genius. And that’s why while many of the kids who graduate this year and every year seem eager to break out of high school and let the world wash over them and change them...while they seem so enthusiastic about casting off what they were in high school to become like the people they meet in college or in the workplace...while the main thing that is celebrated in most graduation speeches is how the school prepared them for the world...I leave GDS with (are you surprised?) a completely different idea in mind.

I leave here—and I encourage all of you to leave here too—with the idea not that we should become more like the world, but that we should work hard, work all our lives, to make the world more like GDS...as tolerant as GDS, as happy as GDS, as caring as GDS, and yes, just as weird, as quirky, as eccentric, and as gloriously different as GDS.

Not only does the world need to be a lot more like us, not only does the world need all of you out there making it more like us, but if we succeed, then we never really have to leave this place—we can bring it with us...we can plant seeds of it here and there, we can keep what we

have gained, and what we have learned and what we love, with us for the rest of our lives.

Now, you may remember that when I began, I mentioned that Louise read to us a few weeks ago from *The House on Pooh Corner*...and that's where I would like to conclude:

"If anybody wants to clap," said Eeyore, "now is the time to do it."