



# High School Graduation

June 8, 2008

Speech by Chris Thompson, Faculty Speaker

Peter, Kevin, Barbara, Gloria, esteemed colleagues, supportive families, and most of all, the beloved class of 2008: I am honored to be asked to give this speech today on this very important occasion. It is perhaps fitting that we are met in an auditorium on a college campus, for we here get a glimpse of the larger world we will all face, in one way or another, come the fall.

There is also apt geometry to our presence in this room...here sit the Class of 2008, eagerly looking toward your future, and at your side, sit those who have been at your side these four years. When I started my career in teaching twelve years ago, my mother-in-law, June Marquis, a career mathematics educator, told me an old teachers' adage that when we are doing our job well, we are not acting as a "sage on the stage," but rather as a "guide on the side," looking at our subject with our students, not being the subject itself. Well, for the next few minutes I have to try to be the sage on the stage, but I'd rather you be thinking of those who are indeed at your side today, for that is where we, your teachers and coaches, still belong.

But there is more to the geometry of this room. Class of 2008, when this ceremony is over and you turn to process out, you will be facing those now behind you, those who have always been behind you, even when you forgot they were there. The families and friends here to support you today will in a short time receive you back from us, from the people to whom they handed you some twelve or thirteen years ago, teachers in whom they had to place a trust, a trust you will only fully understand one day in the future when you have to let go of a little hand yourself and tell a little boy or girl of your own "It's going to be fine," and "You'll have lots of fun," and "I can't wait to hear all about it this afternoon," and you then turn and head back to the car with a lump in your throat and needing the kind of windshield wipers they just don't make.

A bond of trust began that day between your folks and my colleagues, a bond that comes to fruition here this day, as we who have been at your side turn you back to those who are and have been behind you all these years, and whose eyes might again be a little misty. Hands long

ago parted will grasp once again today, bigger hands, grasping with the firmness and confidence of adulthood and a more certain future. And although you are about to get what is truly a valuable diploma, Ralph Waldo Emerson would tell you that your future will not be made by the road you have been on, or the road you next travel, but by the person who is on that road.

And who is on this road today, standing at this intersection of past and future? All of GDS's graduating classes have had discernable characters of one sort or another, and the class of 2008 is no different.

It's hard for me, who is a teacher and a parent of a graduating senior in this class, to come up with a summary statement about the class of 2008. I have come to know so many of you so well, and you are such memorable individuals, that some sort of mass proclamation of your virtues just isn't going to cut it. So I'll choose an anecdote that I hope can paint a picture of you as a class, as I have seen you in my heart during these years together.

Last June, for the second year in a row, I had the privilege of going with a bunch of GDS kids to do community service in New Orleans. Our job this year was to do drywall renovations on a house in St. Bernard parish, a house newly owned by the Du Plessis family. Their original home had been destroyed in Katrina, and this house had been damaged and gutted, and we were making it livable so they could move in. The Du Plessises were very friendly to us . . . they came every day, often bringing lunch. They had a teenage son, Antoine, junior, a high school football player who had just finished his senior year. Antoine showed up the first day to check things out, and he was a little shy, but our kids were so warm and welcoming and friendly that he soon fell in with us, and came back every day to work alongside GDS. Antoine's mom told me that this was such a blessing for him, in that all of his high school friends were dispersed by Katrina, and his new high school was far away, so he had really no friends to hang with. Our GDS kids took him in with such grace and warmth, inviting him to spend time with us in town in the evening, and asking for permission to invite him to our big dinner out our last night there. You all would have been very proud. I sure was.

Now, as it happened, we were there for a changeover of the Americorps volunteers who lead the work teams. On Tuesday, Megan, a volunteer who had become very close to the Du Plessis family, had her last day, and we had a big lunch, and there were a lot of tears and hugs and

*Speech by Chris Thompson, Faculty Speaker  
June 8, 2008*

promises to stay in touch. Coming on board that day was our new Americorps volunteer, Kim, who was shier than Megan and obviously walking into a tricky situation...replacing a favorite, and having to pick up working with people she didn't know on a project already underway. But she did fine. The GDS kids were again warm and accommodating, and as Kim soon discovered, very diligent, and Kim got into the swing of things very well. On our last day, as was customary, Kim gave a little speech over lunch, about what good workers we were and how pleased she was with all we gotten done. When she was finished, one of GDS kids, Anier Woodyard, sensed it was time to give a little speech of his own. He said: "Kim, you know you came into a difficult situation here. Everybody loved Megan, you didn't know us or what we were like, but you stepped in and you stepped up and led us and made this a very successful week. You have the heart of a lion."

I was sitting next to Mr. Du Plessis at that moment, and he leaned over and whispered to me, "Where do you get kids like this?"

Where do we get kids like this? Well, we get them from you, moms and dads, who trusted us four or seven or twelve years ago to provide fertile ground for your saplings to grow in—and eventually out of—and they have done so, which we acknowledge in this ceremony today. They have grown in skill and in confidence and certainly in the classical virtues of diligence and brotherly love.

As a virtue, brotherly love doesn't really mean loving your kid brother, although you should, no matter how annoying he is. Being annoying is his job, after all. Brotherly love here means sympathy and kindness, and it is perhaps the virtue that matters most to us as a progressive school, and which best characterizes the class of 2008. It is the virtue that I saw so clearly on display not just in New Orleans, but every day at school, in the senior corner, in our classrooms, on our regular community service days, on the crew team...everywhere in evidence was an extraordinary warmth and friendship not just among the class of 2008 but in your relations with the faculty and even with the underclassmen in the school.

So, in conclusion, let me say that in addition to the people at your side and the people at your back, there are in this room, most important of all, 115 extraordinary young people. Class of 2008, we have all done all we could for you these past four years, but my sense of you as a group is that you have done as much or more for yourselves. It is telling that in your yearbook

*Speech by Chris Thompson, Faculty Speaker  
June 8, 2008*

pages there are endless overlaps of groups of friends. The class of 2008 is notable for your cohesion, your good humor, your caring for each other, your learning from each other, and your willingness to be a force of both conscience and good will at GDS. Speaking as both a parent and a teacher, I can say that I have never known in my teaching years a more socially adept, socially graceful, warm-hearted and considerate graduating class. Paraphrasing Emerson again I will say that although this day is an intersection of a road ahead and a road behind, it is not the road itself that matters most; what matters most in this world is who is on that road. And with you on the road toward our nation's future, I think all of us in this room can take heart.

The road you are on today will soon take you up five steps to this stage. Think of those first four as the four years of education you have had put before you, like hurdles, by us on the faculty at GDS...but think of that last step as the one you, as individuals and as members of this amazing class, made for yourselves and with each other in these last four years, through your diligence, cooperation, and kindness. It's this last step that brings you for one last time into our embrace before we hand you off to your families and your futures.

You can truly never descend from this stage...the diploma and all that it stands for is yours, and will be part of you forever. But know this: as we say goodbye to you, high school students for just a few minutes more, in this college auditorium on this day, our hearts break, but from these broken hearts angels fly and they are angels that will be with you all of your days. Class of 2008, have the heart of a lion. Godspeed and God bless you always. Go in peace.