



High School Graduation

June 8, 2008

Speech by Susie Gelman, Parent Speaker

When Peter asked me to be the senior parent speaker at this year's graduation, you could have knocked me over with a feather. After all, the list of previous speakers reads like a veritable "Who's Who" of official Washington: Alice Rivlin, the first woman to be appointed director of the Office of Management and Budget; Seymour Hersh, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author; Norman Ornstein, political scientist, quintessential Washington pundit, and aspiring stand-up comedian; and Martin Indyk, former US Ambassador to Israel, to name just a few. The only traits I have in common with these individuals are that we have all been GDS parents and we are all Jewish, which I realize at times may seem redundant.

Anyway, once I recovered from the initial excitement, the challenge of delivering appropriate remarks became apparent. I was given certain instructions: "be funny," which I took to mean be funny according to GDS standards—sardonic, but not sarcastic; witty, subtle, and piercingly incisive, but not silly, trite, or obvious; erudite and au courant, but not overblown or pretentious. I was also told "don't be cheesy," whatever that meant. And of course, above all—under no circumstances was I to say anything that might cause the slightest tinge of embarrassment to a certain graduating senior.

Then I thought about the setting. Not only would I be speaking along with Peter, Kevin, and Chris—one former history teacher and two seasoned English teachers—but I would be sharing the podium with Jacob and Joanna and making my remarks in front of Georgetown Day School's entire English faculty. Talk about pressure!

So I did what any sane person would do: I Googled commencement speech do's and don'ts to see if I might glean some inspiration and find some practical suggestions for approaching this daunting task. Naturally, there are all sorts of commencement speech texts and quotes available online, and if one is really desperate (I swear that I am not making this up!), one can go to Speech-Writers.com which offers, for only \$19.97 (that's down from the original price of \$39.00) a package of nine sample high school graduation speeches plus a bonus package of

three sample concluding poems and some tips on speaking in public. I have to admit that I was tempted.

But I resisted the temptation, as I'm sure all of our graduating seniors have done when facing a blank computer screen mere hours before the deadline for handing in some critical paper or report.

By this point, I figured that I would have spent almost half of my allotted time talking about the speech instead of actually saying anything, therefore reducing the time necessary to say something serious, such as offering advice or other observations about life that are the sum and substance of commencement speeches. This is, of course, a tactic well known to students and to the teachers who review and grade their work; it's called "filler."

Up until now, I actually had one page's worth of remarks. Given that this is a speech and not a paper, I wasn't able to use some of the well-known strategies such as slightly increasing the font size, widening the margins or adding extra spacing in order to "enlarge" the document—again, something that I am certain our graduating seniors have never done during their high school careers.

But finally, the moment of truth arrived. That is to say, I had to come up with some sort of content, instead of continuing to filibuster. So here it is, my attempt to tread gingerly through the commencement speech minefield in five minutes or less.

I stand here as a representative of all parents of our graduating seniors. Some of us have known you, members of the class of 2008, since you were four or five years old (or even earlier, if you happen to be our own child). We have watched you grow from the cute little tykes you were in Lower School to awkward adolescents to self-assured young adults, ready to take on the world, or at least, the college or university world. We've watched you in assemblies; accompanied you on field trips; camped out with you at Buffalo Gap, Turkey Run, and Prince William Forest where we survived the tick infestation; cheered you on at sports events; and applauded you at the end of concerts, musicals, and plays. We've spent millions of hours driving you to and from school and various after-school activities. We've attended scores of curriculum nights, parent-teacher conferences, and potluck suppers. We've packed thousands of school lunches, filled out numerous permission slips and those annoying medical forms, and—the bane

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of my personal existence—rummaged through hundreds of family photographs, usually the night before the deadline for some ersatz school project. Some of us have even gotten slightly overextended by approaching the annual Lower School science fair as if it were a breeding ground for future Nobel prizewinners. We've dried your tears, shared in your accomplishments, supported you in times of disappointment, and best of all, we've basked in your reflected glory.

So here's a bit of advice to all of you as you leave the protected womb of GDS and venture out into the world. First and foremost, never take yourselves too seriously. The world is full of self-important people whose image of themselves vastly exceeds their actual or potential contribution to society, and you don't need to add to their rosters. Second, find something that you love to do, and do it. Whether you are fortunate enough to combine passion and profession, as your teachers certainly have done, or whether you discover an outlet through volunteer work or community activism, find some way to make this world a better place. Third, speak out against injustice, whenever and wherever you see it. GDS has given you the tools you need to be articulate and persuasive; never be silent or passive when you confront a wrong that you can help to right. Fourth, vote! Not just in presidential elections, but in every election; local elections are important, too, and voting is a right and a privilege that far too many people in our country take for granted. Finally, don't think of learning as something that ends along with your formal education. For the last few years, I have been taking courses just a couple of blocks from this auditorium, with students who are literally the same ages as my kids. While my family pokes fun at my occasional bouts of anxiety about turning in papers and completing assignments (see, I wasn't just speaking hypothetically about how to make a paper seem longer than it actually is) the truth is that there are few things more satisfying than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake—the love of learning that is one of the precepts of a GDS education. It can be difficult to appreciate this vaunted “love of learning” when you are in the midst of satisfying course requirements, whether in high school or in college, but in time, it will hopefully lose its clichéd aspect and become something meaningful and cherished that adds to the quality of your lives.

As Antoine de Saint Exupéry wrote in *The Little Prince*, “Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to have to explain things to them always and forever.” While the author could not possibly have anticipated the technological advances that sometimes befuddle members of my generation but seem so natural to yours, we, your parents, count on you to continue to be patient with us in explaining the obvious. After all, the vast

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majority of us didn't benefit from a GDS education.

Today's graduation is a bittersweet moment for our family. Not only is our youngest child graduating from GDS, but so are we, after nineteen years as GDS parents and forty tuition years. Michael and I will always be grateful to GDS, not only for providing an outstanding education to each one of our three children—Asher, Sarah, and Rachel—but for creating an atmosphere in which service to one's community and appreciation of those who are different are as valued as academic pursuits. Rachel, you and your classmates have set a standard of excellence as human beings that will be your enduring legacy to this wonderful school. Thank you, seniors, for the joy that you have brought and will continue to bring to our lives. Always remember just how much everyone here loves you, and may you always have fair winds and following seas.