



# High School Graduation

June 10, 2007

Speech by Peter Branch, Head of School

It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the 36th Commencement of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2007. I am delighted to see you all here today to recognize and honor the accomplishments of this group of uniquely talented and dynamic young men and women. They are poised on the edge of their seats, not for my talk of course, but for the moment when they walk back down the aisle with their diplomas and go out into the world. Second semester seniors, now enrolled in colleges and universities, they have already psychologically left us, parents and teachers, behind. But we have them yet with us, if only for a few more moments.

While they have been with us at GDS, they have contributed much to the life and spirit of the school. I particularly owe them a great deal for their leadership of the student body through the physical and emotional changes which the new High School facilities have wrought. Change is never easy, even, or perhaps especially, for adults. But during your junior year, you endured with patience and good humor the noise, confinement and the displacement of the big dig.

This year you roared into the new student forum the first day of classes and made it and the school your own. Borrowing from the Grateful Dead, your Class of 2007 tee-shirts read "What a long strange trip it's been!" The editors of your yearbook selected as its theme, "New Addition." They noted: "To us, GDS has always been a place that we could make our home. By choosing to play music in the student forum, painting birthday signs for friends, and finding a nook in the hall that is just right, not too big and not too secluded, GDS students have been able to transcend academic changes, physical changes, and personal changes by keeping 'their place' in the school. On the down side, as one of your senior quests noted, you have felt so at home at GDS that parts of it have sometimes looked like your unkempt bedrooms. As a result, you have left us both a challenge and the inspiration for a solution which will hopefully make GDS an even better place for all of us who work and live there.

You are a group of young men and women of many talents. In class you have shared your gifts

of perception and eloquence, as well as your concern for each other. Such talents have been honed since your earliest days at GDS. While many of you joined GDS in the High School, many others were promoted from the Lower Middle School. In fact, twenty eight of you are lifers who entered in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten. Five of you are children of alumni. Your ranks have now grown to a total of one hundred and thirteen.

Academically, you have been willing to challenge yourselves and to take risks. Such efforts have born fruit as you have grown in your skills and performance. The first senior class to experience fully the new SAT I with writing, your combined median verbal, math and writing scores were four hundred and forty six points over the national median. Thirty nine percent of you were recognized a Finalists or Commended Scholars by the National Merit programs. In your junior year, eighty nine percent earned Advanced Placement passing scores of three or higher, sixty seven percent scores of four or higher, and thirty nine percent received the top score of five.

Your plans for the immediate future are diverse, even though all of you have been accepted by a college or university. Indeed, your class was accepted by four hundred and three different institutions and will attend sixty seven different schools, with some of you going to colleges in Switzerland, Scotland and Canada. Three will matriculate at conservatories in your fields of musical theatre, dance and cello. A number of graduates will pursue gap year or semester off options. For example, one will focus on sharpening her climbing skills overseas, another will spend time in Latin America continuing environmental research, and yet another will study in England while developing his soccer skills. The range of interests and the willingness to enhance them in unique ways is remarkable and admirable in this group of Hoppers.

Without question, GDS athletic spirit has benefited from our new facilities. You broke them in and showed us how to enjoy them. The sound of exciting competition in the gym drew us to see you play and the accessibility of the all-weather field called spectators out of the forum. Four extraordinarily dedicated members of your class received twelve letter awards for participating on varsity teams for all three seasons for all four years of high school. Eleven athletes were awarded four year awards in the fall, eleven for winter sports and nineteen for spring participation. Such leadership was critical to the spirit and accomplishment of our teams. One member of the crew team was chosen as one of forty four athletes named by U.S. Rowing to its 2006 Scholastic Honor Role. Another senior was one of only three GDS runners in our history to

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compete in the Nike Indoor National High School Track Championships, setting a GDS record for indoor four hundred meters and being named to the Post's first team in Boys Field and Track. Another of you was the number one women's foul shooter in the DC metro area. And, of course, you prevailed in Powder Puff football. To foster school spirit, a group of you led the effort to establish the GDS Fan Club, wearing tee-shirts with the motto: "Home is where the heart is." On occasion, you even inspired us by appearing as pirates.

You were just as committed to the Arts at GDS but had to delay your gratification with the new performing arts facilities until they were completed. Fortunately, an early delivery of the new Black Box meant that only the fall production of "Arabian Nights" had to be otherwise located. You masterfully responded to the Director's vision of mounting this production in a tent. Those of you who led the backstage, or rather backtent, efforts are to be commended for all your flexibility and creativity during this challenging year of changes. The One Acts moved into the theatre soon after it was finished and the musical production of On the Town appeared to be an attempt to see what the new Black Box could do. You stepped into other new spaces with performances that looked like you had always been there – Fata Morgana in the new dance studio and splendid vocal and instrumental shows in the student forum, as well as the theatre. Several of you have shown us your gifts as individual performers. One of you is a cello player who has performed with Yo Yo Ma and at Carnegie Hall. Two of you staged one person shows as quests in the Black Box, with one raising over one thousand dollars for Cancer research.

In studio art, the new halls of our enlarged space have been enhanced by the display of your work. In the Congressional Art Competition, two GDS seniors received the second and third place awards. One of you was named the Shell Youth Wildlife Photographer of the Year. Three of you won a prize in the C-SPAN student cam project without actually using a video camera. Your participation in Blues Alley in Georgetown gave others the chance to learn that jazz is alive and well at GDS.

Your dedication to language and the word gave quality to GDS publications this year, most notably Menagerie, the yearbook, the Augur Bit, our newspaper, and the revived Grasslands, the literary magazine. Two of you had poems accepted for the Parkmont Poetry Prize. One of you won an essay prize on the preservation of Civil War battlefields. In Debate, It's Academic, Model UN and Model Congress you also showed an individuality in argument and expression which brought you reward and recognition. Your work in SSC similarly demonstrated an appeal

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to reason as you grappled with issues of school governance.

You have also been active participants and leaders in the many activities which fulfill our commitment to the equal worth of each individual within our diverse community. The Black Culture Club, Rainbow Connections, Latino Arts, AWARE, Fusion, SIS, indeed all our organization which value and celebrate the unique individual qualities of all us who make GDS GDS, have benefited from your dedication of time and energy. As a result, you have contributed to successful local and national Student Diversity Leadership Conferences, GDS diversity retreats, the White Privilege Conference, Gay Pride Week, and the Martin Luther King, Jr., Day teach-in. One of your members was the winner of the Princeton University award for dedication to diversity efforts.

Part of what you have learned at GDS is the interdependence of the peoples of our world. Your participation in community service has given much to others, but hopefully it has also inspired in you a commitment to better the conditions of life for others beside yourselves. As a class, you have served over 17,340 documented hours of community service. Eleven students worked over three hundred hours. You tutored school-age children and guided pre-schoolers, coached and taught physically challenged and autistic children and adults, built low income housing, tended neglected and abused animals, fed the hungry and aided the homeless, advocated on behalf of human rights, worked in congressional offices and at the National Zoo (no connection intended there), visited the aging, assisted the children of migrant workers, worked to bridge the divide between Israeli and Palestinian teens, helped build a school in Ethiopia and gutted destroyed homes in New Orleans. Four members trained to become EMTs. And this work took place throughout the United States and the world. This class, in particular, looked for unique ways to help those in need. You have much to be proud of.

This year has been one of first time events which may very well become GDS traditions. You have been responsible for the first GDS game of Assassin, the first roller-disco homecoming dance in the new garage, the first sit-in in the library, the first sit-on on the field, the first game of laser tag, not to mention other firsts that are best left unmentioned.

As you leave this hall today as graduates and alumni of GDS, you will be marking a significant change in your life. There are numerous such markers which we observe over time – birthdays, the first day of school, graduations, marriage and commitment ceremonies, first jobs,

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promotions, not to speak of divorces, retirements, and funerals. Change is the nature of life. Most often, however, it is not marked by ceremony. It just creeps up on us. At my age, I am less and less able to jump from one boat to another, although I still try, much to the dismay of my wife and children.

But since change is inevitable, we achieve little by seeking to ignore or resist it. Our effort must be, as yours was when you first entered our new high school, to make it our own. As you confront the issues of the world, do not try to separate yourself from the realities you find there. Do not think that they will have no effect on your lives. Mere opposition will be futile and will lead to frustration. You owe it to yourselves and to others to bring your talents to bear on the great issues of your time. It is important, in managing the inevitable daily demands, that you not think small or forget the larger goals of your lives. The maroon stripe itself is not important, but what it signifies is. Remember the lessons and the skills you have been taught at GDS – flexibility of mind but steadiness of purpose, celebration of difference but commitment to common values, and, above all, devotion to those you love and who love you.

The Faculty and I believe the Class of 2007 has the ability to make a positive difference in a world which all too much needs change. Go forth unafraid and with our affection and best wishes. Congratulations on your successful commencement.

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