



High School Graduation

June 4, 2006

Speech by Peter Branch, Head of School

It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the conclusion of the sixtieth year of Georgetown Day School, to our thirty fifth Commencement and to the graduation of the Class of 2006. As you can see, we've got seniors! I am delighted to see you all here today. After many years as a school head, I am well aware, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, that the Class of 2006, will little note nor long remember what I say here. Nevertheless, at this ceremony, it falls to me, first, to revisit the accomplishments of these talented and energetic young men and young women for the benefit of their families and friends and, second, to challenge our near graduates as to what they will do in the years ahead with all their talents and acquired skills and knowledge. As they will soon learn, there is no rest for the able.

The GDS Faculty and Staff well know and appreciate the Class of 2006. We have seen your positive impact on the School and each other since the first of you entered in the fall of 1992 as pre-kindergartners. Indeed, twenty five of you are lifers who entered in pre-k or k. Your ranks have swelled to a total of one hundred and three, with a class ethos of both strong individuality and of mutual support. Your character and gifts are diverse.

Your intellectual abilities are undoubted. Despite the implementation of the new SAT I, your combined verbal and math SAT I average was three hundred and twelve points above the most recent national average. Indeed, one of you received the top possible SAT I combined score of sixteen hundred. You have been willing to challenge yourselves academically. Your advisors have tried, often unsuccessfully, to get you to limit the number of your honors and Advanced Placement courses. Nevertheless, this year your class took a total of two hundred and fifty AP tests. Ninety percent of the exams you took as juniors received college credit grades. Fifty of you received recognition as Finalists or Commended Scholars in the National Merit, National Achievement, or National Hispanic Scholarship Programs. Two of you had the unique honor of winning awards as Presidential Scholars, one from Maryland and the other from the District of Columbia.

In looking toward your paths beyond GDS, you had the wisdom and sense of yourselves to look broadly for colleges and universities which best fit you as individuals. As a result, this class sent applications to one hundred and nine different colleges and universities. Defying the national hysteria about multiple applications, you applied to an average of six schools, just what your college counselors recommended. You will be attending a total of fifty nine different institutions.

The life of the School has benefited from your leadership. You were remarkably good peer leaders to the freshmen, providing support and good cheer, as well as a second lunch out, much to the delight of the freshmen and the local restaurants. The positive spirit of SSC was generated through your personal approach to the school community. On multicultural and sexual orientation issues, you facilitated school, regional and national dialogues, obtaining recognition for GDS's efforts at the DC Metro Diversity Leadership Conference and the national People of Color Conference. On Diversity Retreats and during Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, you gave voice to the need to celebrate all of the students in the School.

In the Arts, you will be missed Your individual talents were remarkable as shows, one acts, musicals, and vocal and instrumental performances over your four high school years demonstrated. Particularly notable during productions was your basic decency to each other, to the faculty and to younger students. Your studio art work enhanced the halls of GDS.

Although community service is often begun as a requirement, many of you came to understand it as a personal and social responsibility. Together, you have contributed a documented 12,734 hours to helping others. You have worked on ranches in the West and revitalized urban parks in the District; you've worked to rebuild the Louisiana coastline and constructed low-income housing in D.C.; you've saved endangered animals; coached children in a variety of sports, prepared meals for the hungry and homeless; saved lives in emergency rooms and ambulances; provided help to the elderly and ill, and tutored and mentored children in schools, recreation departments, through music, the Special Olympics and our own art department. You have worked all over the world. A number of students have spent hundreds of hours creating a sister school in Ethiopia. Altogether, this has been a remarkably caring class.

In athletics you have given great support to GDS teams for four years, helping win two MAC Cross Country banners, two MAC Track and Field banners, and two MAC men's soccer banners. Many of you have been named to the all-league teams in MAC and ISL for your

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respective sports. Three of you ran on the four-by-eight-hundred meter relay team at the Nike Indoor nationals which placed eighteenth in the nation and set a new GDS record. All of the teams which would have used our field bore with good grace, and even with success, the absence of home games as a result of the construction.

In this talented class, there were many individual achievements. A listing of a few of your honors captures the breadth of your interests. One young woman collected twenty eight hundred prom dresses for very grateful Katrina victims and got more media attention than many a celebrity or politician. Another individual was the national winner last year of the Lincoln Essay contest in which she described how "sitting in the hall between classes, my friends and I discuss the faults of our school's administration, the right to same sex marriage, and the justification for the Iraq war." As a junior, another student helped save his father's life thanks to the application of CPR learned in a GDS P.E. class. In the National Latin exam, a member of the Latin Cult earned a perfect score. One of you received a Scholastic Art and Writing Gold Key this year for her Photography Portfolio. You contributed to the most successful Debate team in GDS history, in one weekend taking the top prize in tournaments on both coasts. Two of you were named the Top Debate Squad at the High School level, an award given this year for the first time.

In the Auger Bit and the Yearbook, in Its Academic, Model Congress, Model UN, the National Science Bowl, the National Math Exam, and in all the ways GDS students challenge yourselves and bring life to our school, the Class of 2006 has been distinguished.

After the Awards Assembly, it was my pleasure to receive a copy of the 2006 Menagerie, the GDS yearbook, which adopted as its theme, "Under Construction," with a wonderful grasshopper holding plans and wearing a yellow hardhat. With the spirit of generosity which this class has shown throughout its career, the editor writes, in the Foreword, that "What we hoped to highlight ... was not the minor inconveniences of the building process, but, rather, this dynamic time of new beginnings and positive change." She then comments that "the entire GDS school community shares the feeling of excitement about the physical changes which will enhance the GDS experience."

From the rapt attention to the construction site of students in the library to the cooperation of parents with the new carpool procedures to the successful and speedy packing efforts of the faculty and staff, the GDS high school threw itself into supporting the construction professionals

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in their efforts on our behalf. Dislocated from their former perches around GDS, seniors found new haunts and even friends and laid claim on their own square of carpeting in the halls.

The yearbook theme of "Under Construction" also reflects, in the minds of the editors and staff, "the essence of senior year in a more symbolic sense." "After all," they wisely note, "senior year is a time of figuring out who we are and where we are going, at least for the next four years. Our lives are under construction, and we have all benefited from the firm and deep foundations that GDS has provided us with in the academic fundamentals, but they have also instilled in us the power of intellectual curiosity, excitement and risk-taking. As we embark on the next phase of our lives, we have been enriched by the school's values of respect, trust and caring."

As Head of GDS, I could not be prouder of that succinct summary of the goals of this school. The Class of 2006 gets it. And you know that you are still a work in progress, or under construction. The faculty from your earliest days at GDS has valued and challenged your undoubted intellect. On the other hand, you and they have known when your curiosity and developmental inclinations got it wrong. One of the great things about being head of a pre-k to grade twelve school is the opportunity to watch such developing understanding. Since you entered third grade, I have that pleasure, as well as a few challenges. In Middle School, when you took too seriously a teacher's expressed desire for one of the white rocks lining Landon's driveway, we had to extend our apologies, and, of course, the rock, to that fellow school. That same year, your sense of justice and respect for community were demonstrated at your post 9/11 assembly when you read from the Koran and the Old and New Testaments and listened to a classmate play Jimmy Hendrix's version of the Star Spangled Banner on her electric guitar.

Your yearbook celebrates the school's values of trust, caring and respect. Those values have become part of your lives because of the belief in them by your family, as well as by your teachers. When the adults in your lives trust you, care for you and respect you, then you learn by that example to extend such support to each other. Mentoring, whether of second graders by fifth graders, or of freshman and sophomores girls by junior and senior girls in SIS, or in Monday tutoring or Tuesday art classes, or of freshmen by seniors, or of children in an Ethiopian village - mentoring has been an essential training for you as the transformative leaders I know you will be.

GDS would not be the school for social justice founded sixty years ago if it did not value your

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character development as much, if not more, than your academic growth. As a result, your teachers value your spirit of care and concern. One of your high school teachers writes, "They helped each other learn more than any group of students I've ever taught." Another commented, "I've never worked with a better class! The camaraderie from the very beginning was remarkable. Any group of '06 students was wonderful to be with."

Trust, caring and respect, of others and their beliefs, are required to a much greater extent in our world than ever before. In his book, *High Noon: 20 Global Problems, 20 Years To Solve Them*, J. F. Rischard offers an agenda that will require global trust and cooperation, environmental care, and a respect for all humanity. It will take the concerted efforts of many to address and reverse the problems which confront us at an accelerating rate. I am confident that from this school, from the members of this class of 2006, we are sending forth individuals of great ability, tremendous values, and much determination. You have so much to offer in sensitivity and vision. May you continue to demonstrate the power of intellectual curiosity, excitement and risk-taking which has made you such a wonderful addition to our school community. Your energy and values are essential to that larger world that you will greet as you leave this hall and GDS.

The Faculty and I have great expectations for the GDS Class of 2006. Go with our best wishes and our many hopes. You have our affection and I know you will continue to deserve our respect. Congratulations on your successful commencement.

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