



# High School Graduation

June 6, 2004

Speech by Peter Branch, Head of School

It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the thirty third commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2004. We gather here this afternoon to usher these wonderful young men and women onto the next stage in their lives. But like them, we find ourselves at the same time anxious and joyful for this change. So before we applaud the commencement of their new opportunities, it is right to pause to celebrate their successes in facing their recent challenges.

This is a class that has remarkable tenure at GDS. Sixteen entered as pre-kindergarteners, and a total of twenty seven consider themselves lifers. Gloria Runyon was your Assistant Principal in those early days. I have known you since you were in fifth grade, struggling with social issues which you have mostly overcome. When you were promoted from the eighth grade in 1999, the first class to be promoted from the new Middle School under the guidance of Barbara Bitner, I noted that you were "wonderful and dynamic leaders of the Lower/Middle School." Those characteristics have not left you and, indeed, have been enhanced by the students who joined this class in the High School, bringing your numbers to one hundred and eleven today. Whether in academics, athletics, the Arts, or extra-curriculars, you have demonstrated a spirit of joyfulness and a dedication to the School, to each other and to all the endeavors in which you have been engaged.

Entering the gym this fall with Marti Gras beads and T-shirts proclaiming, "Let the Good Times Roll," you made it clear that you had not lost your sense of fun and were determined to carry it through your senior year. The yearbook calls that approach to life, "freestyling." You have done it well.

And yet, you have also accepted the challenge of the many opportunities which GDS has offered you. Academically the Class of 2004 has been remarkable for your engagement in intellectual pursuits. This year, ninety five of you took one hundred and ninety seven Advanced Placement exams. Last year, eighty six percent of your AP exams received college credit

grades. Forty members of this class received recognition in the various National Merit Scholarship competitions this fall.

This very diverse class has demonstrated your individuality by applying to one hundred and ninety three different colleges and universities and will be attending a total of sixty seven different institutions. I am pleased that you have made a real effort to find the school that is right for you even if your indecision at times made your college counselors slightly crazy and your parents even more so.

This class has contributed greatly to the recognition of the home of the Mighty Hoppers as a jock school. The Women's Basketball team was first in its league and first in its tournament. Women's Soccer took second place in its league. In the men's league, GDS Cross-Country and Tennis took second place, Soccer and Track took third, and the GDS men's teams placed 3rd overall. fifty GDS athletes were named all league players, one young woman receiving recognition in two sports. Another student was named Scholar-Athlete by the Women's Sports Foundation. And thirty four recognition awards were given to members of this class who participated on teams for all four years of high school, a real record of dedication.

This class has also been devoted to helping others, contributing well over 12,500 hours of community service. Thirty two students provided over one hundred hours, and five gave over five hundred hours. Your service took you from Maine to South America and spanned North America. You have been tutors, coaches, teachers, carpenters, animal rescuers, environmental and housing advocates, congressional interns, performers, and emergency medical technicians. You have worked in hospitals, nursing homes, shelters, food kitchens, cemeteries, parks, and all sorts of educational environments. This is a class that reached out to others with generosity and respect.

Your devotion to GDS's historic commitment as a diverse school community has been both a result and a factor in the struggles and successes this year in building a respectful and caring environment within and outside the walls of GDS. Your participation in assemblies, forums, retreats, and the ongoing discussion of such issues has been essential in providing positive leadership to the rest of the student body. Working with your principal, Paul Levy, you were successful in ending discriminatory practices by Best Buy and in opening up dialogue with the highest level of that corporation. You have much to be proud of but you have also learned that

*Speech by Peter Branch, Head of School  
June 6, 2004*

trust can be maintained only if all members of a community are treated with equal care and respect.

Last night many of us attended a final concert by members of this class at The Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage. Conducted by our faculty speaker this afternoon, that event featured the Honors Chorale and Five O'Clock Shadow. It was one more demonstration of the creativity, talent and dedication of members of this class. I cannot imagine a more demanding schedule, between Final Exams, the Prom and Graduation. But, like all the other events in which you have participated during your heavily scheduled years at GDS, this performance was wonderful and exemplified this class's extraordinary devotion to the Arts, both visual and performing. Several of you have literally written the book in such areas as program development, light design, and theatre production. This spring's musical, Pacific Overtures, which combined so many artistic talents, was a fitting culmination of the year with at least twenty six of you engaged in the production.

Individually you have received many awards which demonstrate in small part the breadth of your activities and the depth of your talent. One of you has been named the female DC Presidential Scholar. Two were Gold Key Recipients in the National Scholastic Art Awards. Three received certificates of excellence at the Harvard Model Congress. Another was the DC winner of the AAA Travel High School Challenge. One of our soloists tonight received the Merit Award in Classical Piano from the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts. Our other soloist was awarded first place at the National Symphony Orchestra's High School Young Soloists Competition. Two members of this class have won national essay contests, one sponsored by the Mars Society, the other by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Two of you are dancers who have received recognition, in one case, as the Outstanding Festival Dancer at the Washington Independent Schools Dance Festival, and, in the other case, as 1st place winner in the Youth Grande Prix Dance Competition.

There is much more that could be said of the Class of 2004, individually and as a group. Your work in student government, in publications, in academic and intellectual competitions and pursuits has shown the variety and strength of your abilities. GDS is the better for your many efforts.

As a historian, it is impossible for me to offer remarks today, June 6, 2004, without remembering

*Speech by Peter Branch, Head of School  
June 6, 2004*

that, sixty years ago, young men of the age of this graduating class, supported by equally young women, were engaged in the brutal and bloody effort to seize a beachhead on the coast of Normandy. They sought successfully to bring a close to the domination of Europe by a totalitarian tyranny. Tom Brokaw has entitled these heroes "the greatest generation." For some that title gains its legitimacy because World War II is seen as an undeniably just war. Leaving aside debates over causation, I think it is important to recognize that, generation after generation, Americans have been called to the greatness that comes with bearing a responsibility for making our world a better place. There has been a historical, even religious, self consciousness in Americans of our hope to provide an example of moral leadership, from John Winthrop's "city upon a hill" to Bush's Wilsonian vision of the United States as the exporter of democracy to the Middle East.

This call to greatness will come, as well, to the Class of 2004. There is a sense, however, that lacking such dramatic endeavors as wars, cold or hot, a generation may lack the opportunity for substantial achievement. Indeed, there are those who believe that today's generation -- X, Y, or Z -- is more focused on private gain than public service, and more dedicated to personal satisfaction than community or national sacrifice. But it should not take great imagination during these challenging times for you find ways to rise above yourselves, to recognize your responsibilities to others and to make a positive impact on your school, college, community, or nation. Given your many talents and opportunities, you have a significant burden in this respect.

The Biblical injunction in this regard comes from St. Luke: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more." This theme has been repeated throughout American history. During the Revolution, Thomas Paine argued that "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must... undergo the fatigue of supporting it." During another just war, Abraham Lincoln was also conscious of this burden when he told his fellow citizens, "We cannot escape history... The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor to the last generation." In 1936, five years before the United States entered World War II, Franklin Roosevelt drew directly from St. Luke in accepting his renomination to the Presidency: "There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny." In 1961, John Kennedy self-consciously took up the challenge and translated it anew in his inaugural address: "For of those to whom much is given,

*Speech by Peter Branch, Head of School  
June 6, 2004*

much is required... Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans."

Now I do not intend to issue today a messianic call to battle to the Class of 2004. But with all the talk about the Greatest Generation, it is important to understand their humanity as well as their heroism and, in so doing, to understand how much your humanity can make you heroes. I am sure many of you have family links to those who lived through the years of World War II. Proud grandparents sitting here tonight may be survivors of those events. My dad was a naval officer in the invasion of Italy and southern France and my uncle earned a Purple Heart in the Philippines where he is buried. These were young men and women like you. Like our women and men in the military today, like those in the Peace Corps, like those who fight for civil rights and environmental protection, like those who have chosen lives of religious or civic service, including your wonderful teachers at GDS, and like so many GDS graduates who volunteer to help others, they had no greater wish than to be individuals of moral courage and integrity. By their dedication to values greater than themselves, they showed respect to their country, their families, their friends and themselves.

There are always many unsung heroes. No mention may be made of your good deeds in The Washington Post. But you will come to a time in your life when you will take the measure of yourself. I hope that the principles you have been taught at GDS - of the worth of each individual, of the value of a diverse community and of the joy of learning - will have served you well. You may find that you will need strength to maintain your beliefs but you will discover rewards in holding true to your ideals. In the midst of the great struggles of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln wrote words that we should all heed: "I desire so to conduct the affairs of this administration that if at the end, when I come to lay down the reins of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside me."

My best wishes to the Class of 2004. I have every confidence and hope in the greatness of your generation.

*Speech by Peter Branch, Head of School  
June 6, 2004*