



High School Graduation

June 6, 2004

Speech by Anna Belew, Class of 2004

About two weeks ago I was watching Peter Branch scooting around the High School lobby in a homemade hovercraft, and all I could think was "man, am I going to miss this place."

I know we all are. This is a time for nostalgia, after all. We're supposed to be whipping out disposable cameras every ten minutes and getting our friends to sign everything we can lay hands on. If our lives had been well-scripted, we ought to be having one last crazy party where bonds are forged, friendships renewed, and one wacky incident makes it a night to remember. Then we can finish it all up with a particularly bittersweet rendition of Green Day's "Time of Your Life" on a classmate's guitar. We should be having an awesome senior prank. I know I probably should be hanging on tooth and nail to the remnants of high school. I should have spent every day in May weeping in the hallways, clinging to my teacher's shirts, and rubbing my face on the lockers. Because that is how much I am going to miss GDS.

But for some reason, none of that's going on.

Why not? Well, it could be something like dignity or sanity. But I think it's a quiet acceptance of the knowledge that we're about to be birthed out into a world much more vast and threatening than what we've known. We've got to toughen up a bit to go out there: no wearing our feelings on our sleeves; no town meetings; no sage headmaster to dispense advice and chocolate frogs. The place outside the high school is not a community that "strives to embrace and encourage diversity" (sic), it's a place that's full of evildoers and bad men! A place that eats puppy dogs and rainbows for breakfast! A great gaping maw that stinks of indifference, fear, and distrust! We know what's coming, and we've already got our backs up. We're too busy practicing our poker faces to sit down and bawl because we're leaving the best place we've ever known. And it really is the best place I've ever known.

Freshman orientation. Me, a scared thirteen-year-old, strutting and preening to prove her worth to these new classmates. I've got my stupid freshman hair all brushed, and my stupid freshman

it's-okay-if-you-don't-like-me-cause-I'm-cool-anyway-please-love-me face on. Didn't take long for me to figure out that it took no strutting for these people to accept me. Effortless inclusion. The thing that continues to stun me about this class is that pretty much everyone is a nice person if you sit down and talk to them. They will actually hear out whatever you're saying and attempt to appreciate it. And I know for a fact that that is an astounding quality to find in an entire group of one hundred and eleven people.

Beyond just acceptance, this place abounds with good vibes. Something about this school fosters a kind of unabashed humanity I've never found elsewhere. Fast forward to my senior year, just a week or so ago. I'm heading to Take Back the Night, a rape awareness event organized by GDSers and held in the lounge. Now, even being surrounded by you hippies for four years, I've still managed to maintain a little bit of lovable cynicism. "Goody," thinks I, "feminist whinings. Male-bashing poems. Unshaven armpits. This will be a blast." And yes, you've guessed it, by the end of the night I was genuinely surprised and moved. I curse GDS for making skepticism and apathy so difficult, but it's almost impossible to resist that raw openness that seeps out when the student body comes together.

Every Winter Assembly I would bashfully feel my heartstrings being tugged when we'd all sing Good King Wenceslas. I'd never felt anything as close to true fairy-tale Christmas spirit as when the entire student body would come together on a day when they didn't have classes to have plastic snow dumped on their heads from the theater catwalk. Peace on earth, goodwill towards men; it seems like a realistic goal when you're surrounded by people who you'd trust with your life for those few minutes of Jingle Bells. During every Variety Show, you can't quite contain the affection for whoever's performing at the moment; you want to give them a standing ovation and a bear hug. Watching your principal grill hot dogs and serve them to you on Community Day is a joy most people aren't lucky enough to have. Hearing opposing viewpoints argued heatedly and respectfully makes you put a dangerous amount of faith in people. Everyone at a student gathering seems to be one of the best people you've ever met, and you could argue that that's true.

I think they might be putting something in the water.

You'll still hear me making fun of whiny idealists, never fear. But I'm afraid I'll never again be

able to wholeheartedly mean it.

I implore all of you not to toughen up too much. Watch your backs, but don't forget how humiliatingly, painfully exposed you've been here. Don't forget that it didn't kill you to be so vulnerable. As embarrassing as it might be to have to acknowledge our humanity, our soft sides, our inner hippies, it's what I'm forever most indebted to this school for. For making it okay to have strong feelings, I thank GDS. For making apathy tough to justify, I thank GDS. For making laziness less excusable, I thank GDS. And for making it harder to be hardened, I thank GDS.