



# High School Graduation

June 9, 2002

Speech by Aminah West, Class of 2002

As I look out on the sea of tasseled caps and gowns...oops, I must have picked up the wrong speech. Unlike many commencement speakers, I speak not to a homogenous, formless mass, nor do I stand here to claim some specific recipe for success. Instead, I speak this day to a community and a class that is unified by the common threads of achievement in pursuit of excellence, prosperity, and service. The GDS community is best characterized by its uniqueness, and indeed by its successes. My own twelve years at GDS have been eclectic in both nature and nurture, and as I transition through and out of this community, I reflect and wonder out loud whether I'll ever experience another place like it. I'm reminded of the ease and comfort with which I've come to address and know my teachers, and how readily teachers and staff relinquished their free time to meet with students who needed extra help on material, or even just wise words of support and guidance. I'll never forget the swell of pride that filled my chest when in the midst of our last Christmas assembly, in addition to biblical stories and holiday caroling, we also heard the "bismila-hirahman-nira-him" that began schoolmate Nora's recitation on the birth of Jesus from the Holy Qur'an. Visions remain of impromptu all-school meetings when we crammed sardine-like into the lounge to discuss issues of diversity, or sought to mend an upset to the community.

I'm young enough yet seasoned enough to remember the days in second grade when we played kick the can, and in fifth grade when we mastered the zipline at country campus while trying to dodge the resident two hundred and fifty pound hog. If I recall correctly, classmate Jonathan Orchin not only got the thrill of a zip through the air, but also on the ground, a nip from that hog which left him with a black and blue calf. Who ever thought that those colorful markings would be a harbinger for the even more colorful artistic designs for which he is better known? Some of our survival skills were gained through such adventures as our three-day trip to Colonial Turkey Run Park in the third grade. We roughed it for real—wearing cotton bonnets, long skirts, and breeches...eating biscuits and chicken stew cooked on an open pit and relieving ourselves in cold latrines that were no more than huge pits in the ground. Seriously, I'll cherish

the way Grant Braswell coached some of his more tentative classmates up trees and through elevated tires and wires as we forged bonds of friendship and trust at the Madeira ropes course in eighth grade. There have been a plethora of culinary delights at GDS, a sampling of ethnic diversity and world culture. Speaking further on seasoning, I'll remember the succulent Jamaican foods that Spanish teacher Michelle Lindgren whipped up to the body-rocking tunes of Bob Marley in her festive International Day workshops. These times were accented by the Bar-Mitzvahs and Bat-Mitzvahs of coming of age.

And so we finally arrived at our high school years. I'll be a long time forgetting the dirt we raked, the walls we painted, the tiles we scrubbed, and the valentines decorations we cut out during our various community service initiatives around the city. It might have been a freakish dream, but I believe I once came to school to find that a sea of marshmallows bathed the front patio in a sticky white snow-much to the amusement of the class of 1999 seniors, and to the dismay of Paul, our beloved principal. I'll have much company in my surreal memories of the somewhat unsettling sight of classmate Pierce McLain ripping the pulsing cherry Jell-O heart out of Cliff Kaplan during our last variety show this year. And then there are the truly surreal memories like; the refreshing afternoon swims in our roof top Olympic-size pool; like our first homecoming and its original "Under the Sea" theme to celebrate our football team's amazing victory over-wait did I say football? Oh well, surely you can savor the memory of the tantalizing food in our state-of-the-art cafeteria. Indeed, no one leaves GDS without some sense of imagination and humor as lenses through which to view life's various travails.

GDS's stated mission is to encourage students to wonder, to inquire, and to be self-reliant, laying the foundation for a lifelong love of learning. This day, molten achievement is poured carefully into a time-honored mold to form a key of the highest quality and distinction. We take this key, forged deeply in the GDS values of diligence, achievement, integrity, service, and compassion, and use this key to unlock the gates to our future education. So today, I ask each of my beloved classmates, has GDS fulfilled its mission through you? When we stumble upon unknowns within ourselves, and in life, do we pose questions and proactively seek solutions? We are solitary vessels with independent thoughts, needs, and will: do we rely on the energies of our spirit and intellect to guide us or are we easily seduced by the amoeboid-like movement of the group? We have been trained to write papers, to manipulate mathematical and chemical equations; to speak in foreign tongues; to follow paths that lead to "the grade", but are we truly

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educated? Are we brave enough to follow paths best suited for our personal growth and development even if those paths are less tread by those around us? The training we receive is measured by what we qualify to do after we train, while our education will be measured by what we actually do in word or deed. Education is a living, growing entity; it's what's left after the training is past. I challenge each and every one of you sitting here today to distill meaning and value from your training and experiences, and actually put it into practice. Remember: service, such as that rendered by Sonija, Jessica, and other classmates, teaching youth to read and think, is the mark of an educated person. The housing and construction services provided by schoolmates Nick DeCell and Richard Minkoff demonstrate true degrees of refinement and learning.

I challenge you to broaden your horizons and clarify your definitions, to reach beyond the clichés, soundbites, and stereotypes. When you venture into communities outside of GDS where you have greater freedom to self select your friends and acquaintances, seek companionship with those who are different from you and who will further enrich your point of view and way of life. For example, mix some Oshun, Obatala, and Salsa into your life. I accept this kind of challenge whole-heartedly.

As I confessed at the start of my address, I have no specific recipes for success, no magical formulas to follow or to synthesize, but I grant you this: each and every one of us, from classmates Alia Akhtar to David Zax, is a success story in the making. We are all intelligent, talented, and accomplished in some manner. I'm sure our success will include comfort, wealth, and recognition, but it will be defined more so by the mechanisms of its creation. By our character and carriage, by the way we treat those around us, by our clarity and indeed, by our happiness. We all co-ether a book of life. In the Holy Qur'an, in surah Al-Isra, "Journey by Night", (chapter seventeen, verse thirteen), a sign is revealed: "And we have fastened every man's deeds to his neck, and on the day of resurrection, we shall bring out a book for him which he shall find wide open." So let us not tread lightly or blindly on the paths of passion and morality. Let the brightest stars be our guiding lights. Let our greatest fears inform our strongest ambitions. Let's seek balance, seek love, and seek to give back to the people and places from which we sprung.

In the words of a favorite poet, my little brother Tariq:

"At times like this,  
Each of us is a quickly darting arrow,  
Soon to find its mark,  
A newfound beam of sunshine,  
Lancing through the dark"

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and family, teachers, staff, and students, it is my pride, my joy and my greatest honor to present to you the illustrious stars, the graduating class of 2002.

Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the future.