



High School Graduation

June 9, 2002

Speech by Sanord Ungar, Class of 2002

Good Afternoon. Marc Efron, Wes Gibson, Paul Levy, Chris Thompson, fellow parents and other family and friends, Members of the Class of 2002, it is a pleasure and a privilege to be with you today.

My first order of business is to thank Aminah West for her thoughtful comments and - how best to put this? - to disassociate myself from the remarks of anyone else here who happens to share my last name. He claims to have been democratically chosen for his spot on the program today, but I can only assume that the results of this shoddy election were audited by Arthur Anderson and the ballots promptly shredded. Phil's mutterings, in any event, come from someone who endured a rather deprived childhood. After all, as many of you realize, he has had only four official birthdays thus far in his life. Wouldn't you be inclined toward cataclysmic predictions if you came to the realization that you were going to qualify for Social Security shortly after your sixteenth birthday?

But enough of that. It really is an honor to be asked to speak to the graduating class of Georgetown Day School - an institution with a hippie past and a buttoned-down future, where children once brought dogs to school but now lead a dog's life, taking AP courses until they drop and learning to regard a quick lunchtime visit to the Safeway as if it were a week in paradise. A place where, as in Garrison Keilor's *Lake Woebegone*, all the children are above average. A high school whose architecture, over the years, has engendered as much comment as its curriculum; where the Hoppers-yes, that's right, the GDS mascot is the lowly grasshopper (the founding mothers must have had something special in mind here)-play their home lacrosse, soccer, and softball games on a field where the scoreboard is greener than the grass; and where there are two very pleasant maitre d's named Paul and Tom who politely greet their customers at the back door every morning.

Including the time spent here by the aforementioned speaker and his older sister, I have been a parent at GDS over a period of fourteen years. My wife Beth and I have been to nineteen

curriculum nights for one child or the other, engaged in-this is only a rough calculation-one hundred and fourteen individual teacher conferences, received seventy-six report cards, attended somewhere between five and six hundred athletic events, and brought delicious lasagna or salad to uncountable sports banquets and pot-luck suppers. We have listened to Middle School band concerts that, in Bill Clinton's time, seemed to feature all of the saxophones manufactured in the United States during an entire decade. We have heard Moses unsuccessfully beg Pharaoh for his people's freedom at so many Passover assemblies that we were almost ready to sympathize with Ariel Sharon's policies. Many of these memorable events occurred in the so-called Big Room at the GDS Lower/Middle School before it was renovated. Most of you remember the Big Room: it was quite small and did not have room for much, least of all basketball games, in which the players were obligated to run into the cement-block walls whenever they went out of bounds.

This record does not take account of the six-and-a-half years I spent as a member of the GDS Board of Trustees, and a couple of those years as its presiding officer. Of course, nothing suppresses the instinct to complain about tuition like being one of the people responsible for setting and collecting tuition. But you would not believe the things that people call you about when you are in such an exalted position-the remarkable ideas parents have for reform of the curriculum so that it conforms to their personal biases; their unhappiness with the timing of spring vacation or with the holiday cards chosen by the administration; and, always, the carpool line at the Lower/Middle School. Not to mention the frequent brilliant suggestions to introduce a GDS cafeteria that would serve nutritionally correct food-an idea whose attractiveness always seemed inversely proportional to the age and grade of one's children.

Many of the people in this auditorium still have younger children in this school. They have many more carpools to drive, teachers to consult, and, in time, nights to sit up worrying. But for quite a few of us, like the graduating seniors, we are leaving the school. Our days of innocence are over. Progress is progress, and time passes in its orderly way, but we may find today's great joy mixed with a little dose of sadness. Bear with us, please.

Over the past nine years, I have been privileged to get to know many members of the Class of 2002. I go back with some of them as far as Prince William Forest in fourth grade, an experience so profound that it caused more than a few to vow that they would never commune with nature again in their lives. I watched them play in Little League baseball games that never

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went beyond three innings, because there were hardly ever any outs, since no one could throw or catch. These graduates were Internet-savvy by fifth or sixth grade, played many video games-exclusively for the purpose of developing excellent hand/eye coordination-and are true pioneers in the world of cell-phone use. I've had the opportunity to visit their classes and assemblies and meetings at various stages, and to be given the same hard time as everyone else.

I saw a particular infusion of talent and ideas and new perspectives when the ranks of this class expanded in ninth grade, and I sometimes sat up late at night with these articulate and interesting people, hearing their thoughts about their school and their complicated world . . . and the intense relevance of the Simpsons to our daily lives. They are an impressive group: they have published books, made films, been amazing singers and dancers and musicians, and vanquished their foes on "It's Academic." They were witnesses to extraordinary domestic and world events-and had the experience, not so long ago, of standing outside the Vice President's residence and the Supreme Court, debating with their fellow citizens the outcome of the last presidential election. Maybe this was a great exercise in democracy, or maybe they were just trying to get themselves on television. Either way, I bet they'll remember it.

I realize that not everyone in this class is going directly to college. Some will pursue amazing and admirable adventures first, for example touring the country in a punk rock band. Jessica, if you're lucky, you'll be successful enough for your classmates to violate your copyright and routinely download your music from the Internet free of charge; maybe someone will even burn a CD for your parents. Thomas will be off in search of the perfect putt, and Alexis-well, I understand you're just going to be Alexis for another year, offering sage and cynical commentary to all who will listen.

But as I tried to think about what message I could offer today to these already very wise and worldly people, I decided that my own new job might qualify me to provide some pithy advice to the college-bound:

- Change your sheets from time to time, especially in the days before your parents come to visit. It is very unpleasant to be nagged about this, and, for that matter, quite unpleasant to sleep on dirty sheets.
- Always put your alarm clock on the other side of your room, far from where you sleep.

It's amazing how much of life-and your education-you can miss if you don't get up in a timely fashion.

- Don't complain about the food. It won't do any good, and this is one of several things that have the potential to drive the president of your college to distraction. You don't want to do that.
- When your parents ask how much sleep you are getting, always round upwards. It will do no good for them to worry, so never send emails right before bed. When all else fails, tell them that listening to their lectures about getting proper rest is interfering with your sleep.
- Bring plenty of underwear. That is the sole determining factor of how often you must do laundry.

But seriously... you are setting off on great adventures, and you will have some unusual opportunities. My real advice? Take intellectual chances. Study something from time to time that you never expected to interest you. Get to know at least one of your teachers well every semester. Try out a new persona. Find some things you can really believe in, and identify areas where you think you can challenge the conventional wisdom and bring about change. And yes, get some sleep. Take care of yourselves.

Never forget who you are and where you are from-where you learned to ride a bike, to keep an ice cream cone from dripping, to do long division, and, no doubt, to do many other things, some wholesome and some not. Keep that place close to you, even when you are far away, and remember what it gave you. You may feel angry over real or imagined indignities you suffered here not so long ago. But please, don't get so swept up in what is new that you cannot appreciate your own original spot and some of the essential grounding in life that it provided. Your home and this school are your touchstones. I hope you will return to them often, literally and figuratively.

Emerging from Georgetown Day School, you know quite a lot about many things. You may be going to the same college with enough of your classmates to have this confidence reinforced everyday, at least for a while. But I guarantee that you will be surrounded by others who know just as much as you do, or even more. They may have struggled in their own ways to get where they are. Some of those who initially seem to you like the biggest losers may turn out to be the

biggest winners. Appreciate them. Learn from each other.

When I asked some of my friends in this class what I should talk about today, they said, "Please, not 9/11. Anything but 9/11." I've restrained myself thus far, but before I close, you have to permit me a few words: I hope that all of us here today have learned something more from those tragic events than the need to beef up our military and our homeland security. I hope we have come to realize the huge agenda before us in terms of international understanding yet to be realized, and I hope we recognize the need to appreciate and live our own lives to the fullest. Despite all the gloomy predictions and the fears that seem to stalk us in precarious moments, this actually is a wonderful time to be alive, to study and to think, to contribute and make a difference. Go for it, my friends. And good luck to you.