



# High School Graduation

August 2, 2020

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon and welcome to the 49th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2020. Graduates, to my knowledge, you are the only GDS class to have a two-part graduation, our drive-thru sendoff on June 7, and a virtual graduation today. This is just one of the many things that has made your senior year unique. The Class of 2020 will live on in GDS history as a once-a-lifetime group with a once-in-a-lifetime senior year.

To help put this in context, I want to zoom out for a minute to the White Mountains of California where, in an undisclosed location in the Inyo National Forest, there lives a bristlecone pine tree named Methusaleh. Methusaleh's germination date is estimated to be 2833 BC, meaning the tree is nearly 5000 years old--and is arguably the oldest living thing on the planet.

It turns out that Methusaleh is not just a very old tree, however. It's also a living history book. As you know, trees form rings as they age, outward from the center, and each year a new, distinct circle of dead wood is created around the trunk of most trees. In that ring, one can find information about rainfall, about the temperature and other events from that year. Trees are giant organic recording devices that contain information about past climate, civilizations, ecosystems and even galactic events.

Back when we were physically in school together, which somehow feels like it was 5000 years ago, I read a novel called *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. The novel made an impression on me, and I decided to give a copy to each of you at your senior sendoff, along with your diplomas and a bunch of other GDS swag. The book tells the story of people and trees, and how the latter provide a broad and deep context for the lives and stories of the former. The book's about a lot of other things too--climate change and activism and love and family and discovering our purpose--I hope you like it. *The Overstory* made me think about those tree rings, like on Methusaleh, the rings that are formed by the world around us and the rings that are formed by our own choices.

So...what are some of the big rings of your lifetimes?

Well, each of you was born in the shadow of 9/11, a world-reshaping event that taught us something about fear and fundamentalism, about hatred and hope, about interconnectedness and more. There's a ring at the very center of your trunks formed powerfully by September 11th, 2001.

Your current outer ring, the one that is just under the bark, and that is coinciding with your graduation, is also being shaped by global events, in this case by two of them. Your ring for the year 2020 is being formed by a globally-defining pandemic, and by a national awakening around racial justice. Both of these phenomena remind us again of our interdependence—that Black lives must matter for any of us to be truly free and human. And that just as my health and safety is contingent on your willingness to wear a mask or wash your hands, so is my humanity powerfully connected to your ability to see me fully and my ability to see you fully.

So in this moment, seniors, you are linked to each other and to global events by both your innermost tree rings and your outermost tree rings. But of course, those aren't the only ways in which you are connected. And these aren't the only things that form your rings. They are formed, too, by your relationships, by your families, by your teachers and by each other. And they've been formed by your journeys at GDS. And so back in May I wrote to you and asked you, seniors, what you'd be taking with you from those journeys. I received far too many responses from your class to share today and I'm only able to share a brief sampling of what you wrote. So, here's some of what you shared with me.

**Ethan Sze** writes:

I would give anything to just have one more day on campus, one more day to walk through the forum, one more day to grab lunch, one more day to be a hopper. I leave GDS very different from when I came in. GDS has taught me to believe in myself. To put faith in myself. To be confident. To be proud of who I am. I came to GDS unsure of myself, I was a short asian kid with a goofy smile. During my four years I was challenged academically but also socially. I learned how to advocate for myself, how to be a leader on and off the race course, how to manage time, and also how to ask for help. I leave GDS with the same goofy smile but also with

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School  
August 2, 2020*

a sense of purpose. A purpose to always do better, to always be better.

**Sophie Schiff** writes:

Here's the most important lesson I learned from GDS: the world is in my hands and I have the power to make a difference. My grade has faced many hardships during our high school experience, from the Marjory Stomeman Douglas school shooting, to this horrible pandemic. But each and every time something tragic happens, GDS has taught me that I have a voice and I must use it. I believe in my generation, I really do, and GDS has empowered me to take on the challenges in the world to make it a better place for all. Thank you, GDS. (I can't wait to send my kids here)!

**Julia Hay** writes:

I am very thankful that my parents were able to send me to a school that tries to focus on social justice because it has taught me to always be conscious of my privilege but also grateful for each opportunity I'm given. I love GDS with all my heart, but just like every institution it isn't perfect; however GDS gave me a push in the right direction. I think what I will take most from GDS is the spirit of never settling for just good enough. Of course I mean this in the context of school work as I will always try my hardest, but I really mean this most when it comes to making change in society. Through my classmates and my teachers, I have learned that it is not enough to say you want change and call yourself an activist. You must be willing to take action in order to create change. It is not simply enough to be the first integrated school in DC, you also need to make sure your curriculum is inclusive and that you're striving to be an anti-racist institution. In the same way GDS is striving to be that type of institution, I have learned to strive to become a more intersectional activist who puts actions behind my words.

**Berret Yuffee** writes:

From GDS I will take myself, for at GDS I became myself. The very air of the place shared and circling through students, teachers, hallways, and classrooms fostered my growth from the undefined, untrusting, "undeserving" child I saw myself to be, into the impassioned, strong yet open-minded, capable, valuable person I saw in the mirror as I drove through the senior send-off in June. GDS teachers do not merely teach their subjects; they teach how to learn

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School  
August 2, 2020*

outside of their class using the world as a classroom, how to keep learning past the short timeframe of their instruction, and how each class is an opportunity to learn about your own capabilities, passions, and value to an ecosystem beyond yourself. Each friend I made throughout my 9 years at the school taught me lessons of living and loving, and their "class" was their friendship, each of which presents a different way to see the world and one's place in it. Though I will miss these wonderful teachers and friends, such was the nature of their lessons that I am not leaving much behind. Every lesson, memory, and friendship is coming with me in the fabric of my body and mind, and when I make my mark on a world larger than my current one, however big or small that mark will be, GDS will be there too.

**Nyah Mays** writes:

Being at GDS for 14 years has shaped me into the person I am today. I have found a new love of learning and a voice to have unforgettable conversations. I will never forget the community that has stood by me and supported me. We have had our issues as any great institution will have from time to time. But unlike other places, we always rise above. We know each other's strengths and flaws, helping us to build off each other and make each one of us stronger. I would have never become the strong and independent person I am today without the help and support of my friends and peers. I would not be as optimistic during this time if it was not for the GDS community. GDS will be a second home to me for the rest of my life.

**Lila Brown** writes:

I have learned the importance of activism for and with people who are different from me. GDS has taught me the strength in a diverse group coming together to fight against injustice. I will always use my voice to push for positive change in the world. From attending walkouts for gun-control during a school day to learning the history of the gay liberation movement in Julie Stein's class, at GDS I have learned the essence of what it means to be an advocate. Being an advocate and a good global citizen is, more than anything, about paying attention and speaking up. GDS has given me the ability to use my voice to advocate for what I care about.

**Isaiah Schuham-Anders** writes:

I will take the ability to create safe spaces for people in order for them to talk about sensitive

issues. By creating those spaces it will allow me to find those in whom I can trust so that they and I will not feel alone.

**Sasha Freedman** writes:

From my GDS education, I've gained core values that I will take with me for the rest of my life -- to prize curiosity, to always respect and see the dignity in others, to advocate for myself, to love learning, and to be supportive of my peers. The person that I am today was fundamentally shaped by GDS and the school's morals, and I feel so lucky to have had the chance to be educated here. Most of all, I will carry forever the love and support I have received from my teachers, who have been the backbone of my school experience.

**Sami Jinich** writes:

I will take with me a sense of purpose that has driven me throughout high school and that will continue to drive me for the rest of my life to make this world a better place by helping to amplify the voices of people from all over the world and from different cultures and backgrounds.

**Talia Rodriguez** writes:

While I don't think GDS explicitly taught me how to bear the emotions of having a pandemic end my senior year, I do believe it has taught me to think beyond that. To understand that I have a duty to heal the world that is going to be much more broken than I thought it would be a couple of months ago. And to understand you can't ever fully say goodbye to a place, a community, that is part of your being.

I am so deeply lucky to have been able to attend GDS, and I know what I have learned from it and what I bring with me for the rest of my life will serve me and my future communities well.

**Noelle Sanderson** writes:

When I first arrived at GDS, I remember having a tough time with the initial transition because I was accustomed to being shown one method in the classroom. I was struck by the many different approaches that were shown to me at GDS, and was pushed by my amazing teachers to venture out of my comfort zone to find what worked best for me. Although this was a part of

the classroom environment, I easily applied this school of thought to issues beyond the classroom. As a woman of color, I, and others who look like me, face many injustices that require many different courses of action. I have been instilled with the power of self-advocacy, learning the importance of fighting for what is right, which is something I do not think I would have acquired in the same way had I not been fortunate enough to call myself a member of this community.

Whether it's starting a support group, marching to Pennsylvania Avenue, or anything in between, I have learned how to answer a call to action. Whether I am personally affected by an issue or not, I leave GDS with the ability to listen, understand, and strategize a plan to move forward. Throughout my years at GDS, I have looked within myself to reflect and deeply consider actions and solutions, which I have been able to apply in both my personal and academic life. I cherish my ability to think critically about the world that surrounds me, and truly do not think I would be the person I am today without being able to call this community my home.

---

Class of 2020, you are still fairly young trees, with lots more rings to come as you live your life's journeys. And yet again and again, seniors, I hear you saying that you will not settle for being shaped by those forces that are bigger than you, be they climate change or systemic racism or a global pandemic. You are committed to acting on those forces however you can, so that the rings that eventually emerge in your lives and the lives of those around you and those who come after you will be shaped by you. That you'll help to build a world that is more just, more inclusive, more equitable, more sustainable. You'll ensure that there's a world in which Black lives Do matter, and in which trees won't just be things that people read about in books. And that's our biggest hope for you.

You'll bear with me, seniors, for extending this metaphor. We've been out of school for a couple of months, and out of our in-person classrooms for nearly half a year. And so I'm sure you're all starved for metaphors. We know that trees don't grow by themselves, they grow in groves as part of an ecosystem. You've been part of this fertile grove for years now, and as you head into new environments, we hope that some of your roots will always remain here. We hope you'll continue to find support and nourishment from your fan section, the teachers and family and

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School  
August 2, 2020*

friends who love you and believe in you and will stick with you when things are hardest. And we know that your roots and trunks are inexorably tied to each other, to your GDS classmates, who will remain your confidantes, your advisors, your dearest friends.

Class of 2020, as you head off to college and beyond, I'm confident that you have everything you need to take with you. And I know I speak on behalf of all of your teachers when I say that we love you. We believe in you. And we are very, very proud of you.