



High School Graduation

August 2, 2020

Speech by Katie Gibson, High School Principal

Welcome graduates of the class of 2020 families, faculty, staff, and friends. Thank you so much for being here virtually with us today. I wish so much that we could be sharing this celebration of our graduates live and in-person. I also know that watching these pre-recorded speeches over Zoom or YouTube on your computer screens can lead to fatigue—so I will deliberately keep my comments short today to focus on our student speakers, Margaux and Gigi, who will be speaking for the Class of 2020. I cannot think of two better young people to represent this passionate and dynamic class.

This event is undoubtedly the most unique graduation ceremony in which I have taken part, and I am sure that the same holds true for all of you. This class has endured a senior year that will stand out not only in our collective memories but in world history. Dual pandemics are currently plaguing us with no clear end in sight. One of them—the Coronavirus—forced your senior year to be cut short as we shut down the school, were told to stay inside, and tried to shift to living life across our computer screens.

While captive at home, the second pandemic emerged—that of systemic racism and brutality against Black Americans. This second pandemic is insidious, and though it has been rampant in the nation for hundreds of years, it has remained invisible to most White Americans. The stay-at-home orders that helped us try to defeat the first pandemic ironically forced us to be captive audiences for the second.

Over the past few months, and thanks to smartphones' recording capabilities and the use of social media sites, citizen journalism has emerged like never before. We are witnessing the broadcast of a seemingly endless stream of unspeakable acts of violence perpetrated against Black Americans. While the savagery is as old as the nation's founding, this is the first time that White America can't look away and unsee what they have seen. As a nation, we find ourselves in a watershed moment of reckoning with our nation's history.

It is not lost on me that I am giving this speech as a White woman in a position of power in a

predominantly white institution. There is an inherent tension of being a White leader calling for racial equity and justice, and knowing that much of why I am in this position is because of the unearned privilege associated with my whiteness. Being a White leader makes me complicit in racist systems even when I am trying to raise consciousness about them. I am genuinely unsure of how to resolve this tension. Still, I am committed to tirelessly grappling with it and using my power and platform to speak out against injustice in our community whenever and wherever I see it.

What I want to focus on today and moving forward is the importance of creating community, and I when I think about community, I can't help but turn to the wisdom of the black feminist thinker and scholar, bell hooks. In her collection of essays *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, hooks writes:

"Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world."

hooks's words move me on multiple levels. Firstly, the notion of "beloved community." This is something that GDS aspires to create. I can say this with absolute certainty. GDS aspires to be a beloved community. A community that people love because it is one in which they feel loved, heard, honored, and affirmed. We aren't there. We know that now more than ever before, thanks to the blackatgds pages. We have a lot of work to do, and that work begins with deep listening.

The next part of this quote that inspires me is the notion of affirming difference rather than eradicating it and of the "claiming [of our individual] identities and cultural legacies." GDS's mission calls us to do this very thing—to "honor the worth and integrity of each individual." We know now that what looked like radical anti-segregationist anti-racist work in 1945 at the school's founding today may sometimes feel like assimilationist thinking. Our ideas around race need to be continually evolving, and we must commit to vigilance in rigorous self-reflection and resulting policy reform and creation.

I am naming the importance of community to you as you prepare to enter the next stage of your journeys. In just a few weeks, you will begin college. For some of you that will be live and in-person, and for others, it will, unfortunately, remain virtual for a time. Either way, your time as

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a GDS student is moving into your past as you move boldly, confidently, hesitantly, humbly, sure-footedly, and stumbling at times... into your futures. And when you do, my hope is that you will remember the importance of building communities wherever you go. Beloved communities. Imperfect ones that sometimes let people down but always strive to lift them up. Through these communities, we will draw the strength we need to begin to heal this nation and this planet.

It is my deepest hope that when you look back on your time at GDS, you will remember all of the ways in which this community held you, challenged you, and inspired you. Remember the teachers who loved and believed in you, the friends you made, the games you won, the shows you performed in, the silliness, the wackiness, the joy! When you ran into the forum as the class of 2020 on the first day of school, at the start of this momentous year, you radiated joy. Remember that.

I found the inspiration to write this speech on the day of John Lewis's passing, so I will pay my respects to him by ending with his words.

"Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year; it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble".

To the Class of 2020 - go make some trouble! Thank you.