



High School Graduation

August 2, 2020

Speech by Jennifer Griffin, Parent of the Class of 2020

Hello, Hoppers! What can I say? This is not the graduation any of us envisioned. Thank you, Russell and Katie for this great honor to address a class like no other. Class of 2020, you've already made history.

I am Jennifer Griffin, mother of Amelia and Annalise Myre, class of 2019 and 20. I've been a journalist for 30 years and for the past 13 years I have worked at the Pentagon covering National Security and the US military for Fox News. I've covered wars, famines and tsunamis but I never thought I would live through a global pandemic.

In 1992 when I graduated from college – not much older than you are now, I used my graduation money to buy a one way ticket to Kenya where I tried to convince a group of drug dealers to allow me to pay my weight in the narcotic khat to get a seat on one of the few flights into Mogadishu. I wanted to join my boyfriend - now my husband - who was covering the famine as a journalist for the Associated Press. A young UNICEF worker took pity on me, flew me into Somalia and I never looked back. I began working in a profession devoted to writing the first draft of history.

When Russell first reached out in February and asked me to speak I had many themes I wanted to address. But current events keep moving too quickly. I have thrown out speech after speech.

Jokes about Zoom calls that went awry. Grasshopper jokes. None of that seems very funny anymore. What geniuses you were back in September when you chose the theme for your senior run-in – pajamas – who knew that 6 months later you would literally be going to school each day in your pajamas? Visionaries, without a doubt.

Fast forward to May 25, a brave citizen journalist kept her camera running while George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during an arrest for allegedly using a counterfeit bill – the video – shot on an iPhone - finally mobilized black and white, old and young to stand up together. You immediately started protesting against police brutality,

white supremacy and just how little value this black man's life was worth to this powerful law enforcement officer in the year 2020 – exactly 20 dollars - that's all. This was not the Jim Crow south. This is now... The final straw.... An inflection point....America erupted. Enough was enough.

GDS students mobilized. Not surprising since Georgetown Day School was founded in 1945 on principles of social justice at a time when blacks and Jews were not being admitted to area private schools. Its mission is still alive and more important than ever. Just before the pandemic and George Floyd's murder GDS teachers Andy Lipps, Meredith Chase, CA Pilling and Kevin Jackson took GDS students on a Civil Rights tour of Alabama from Selma to Montgomery, walking the same path as the Freedom Riders, the same path as the late John Lewis, visiting the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the Legacy Museum and being introduced to Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative.

When I was two years older than you are now - after my sophomore year in college - I left Harvard for South Africa where apartheid was still the law of the land. Race relations were boiling. At Harvard I met two visiting professors who changed the course of my life: one was the editor of the Sowetan newspaper – the country's premier black newspaper in the main township outside Johannesburg. I invited him for a meal in the dining hall. He invited me to come work at his paper. Another South African professor invited me to teach at the University where some African National Congress leaders came of age politically. Little did I know that months after I arrived to cover the worsening township violence as the country sensed apartheid was ending, that Nelson Mandela would be released from prison after 27 years. My first news story overseas submitted to the Harvard Crimson was the day Mandela walked out of prison in Cape Town after years of imprisonment on Robben Island. February 10, 1990.

After that I was hooked. I began bearing witness to people's stories. My husband Greg and I covered conflicts: from Somalia, to Afghanistan, 2 years in Cyprus, Iraq, Iran, 3 years in Moscow, the rise of Putin and 7 years of Intifada based in Jerusalem covering the Israelis and the Palestinians. Since coming back to the US 13 years ago, I have covered the Pentagon.

When Mandela left prison white South Africans predicted civil war, as far right Afrikaaners – armed white nationalists tried to hold onto a system of racial priority. Even whites who welcomed Mandela's release feared the worst. But apartheid ended almost as abruptly as it

was erected in 1948. Overnight people began tearing down signs of oppression in the same way people are tearing down Confederate statues today. Our local post office had a sign above the toilet for non-Europeans – blacks. We tore it off the wall. Little did I know when I arrived in South Africa – a 20 year old taking a gap year - that apartheid was on the verge of crumbling.

Sound familiar? Sometimes societies experience a rise in violence when the old order clinging to an unsustainable past is in its final days. That's when real change happens. And when it happens it happens suddenly. What you do right now matters. You are already on the frontlines. Enough is enough.

You are lucky because what you do and how you shape the world you have been thrust into will shape and define history.

GDS students have already shown during quarantine that you take action. You created music and art in quarantine. You baked. You read for pleasure. I'll never forget Virginia Heinson's anthem to your quarantined class, "Rivers and Roads." You created protective masks and PPE when there were shortages for frontline workers using your 3D printing skills. You networked with a community of pandemic activists because you saw injustice and decided to act: Jonah, Margaret, Anjali, Lila, Zoe, Elias, Abby, Fiona, Maddie and Collin. You garnered national attention for your heroic efforts, Jonah Docter-Loeb. And you kept training. Ziyah Holman – remember these names.

As disruptive as this pandemic has been, I would argue it was an opportunity – time for you to slow down and look up. If the nation had been consumed by sporting events, graduations and proms, the entire country may not have stopped what it was doing after seeing those 8 minutes and 46 seconds and said enough is enough. Afterall, George Floyd was not the first. Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor...and yet this was the straw that broke the camel's back. The impact of the quarantine on these protests and the awakening of America will be evaluated, analyzed and documented by the historians. You are writing the first draft of history.

Nelson Mandela used to say: "It always seems impossible until it's done." And "no one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more

naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

Whenever things feel hopeless remember Mandela. In the darkest days of apartheid he and the other political prisoners Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and others clandestinely passed around The Complete Works of Shakespeare and secretly marked their favorite passages. It became known as The Robben Island Bible. Future ANC leaders Sibusiso Bengu and Ahmed Kathrada chose a passage from *Henry V*:

As many fresh streams meet in one salt sea,

As many lines close in the dial's center,

So may a thousand actions, once afoot,

End in one purpose and be all well borne

Without defeat.

Mandela chose this passage from *Julius Caesar*: “Cowards die many times before their deaths; / The valiant only taste of death but once.” He signed this passage 18 months after the Soweto Uprising... sparked by a photograph – today it would have been an iPhone video as in George Floyd’s case. It showed the limp body of a young black boy Hector Pieteron, being carried by a friend after the school boy was shot by riot police. It marked a turning point – the beginning of the end of apartheid. Black South African school children, led the protests alongside the Black Consciousness Movement. In 1955 Emmett Till’s photo on a magazine cover helped launch the Civil Rights Movement.

In South Africa after Hector Pieteron’s death, students marched and were met by heavily armed police who fired teargas and later live ammunition at the demonstrators. Fast forward to Washington DC: 43 years later - Lafayette Square – riot police in front of the White House just days before what should have been your graduation... violence against unarmed American protesters, many of them students and teachers – some of you were there. And a photograph. The US military standing by in riot gear with the words military police emblazoned across their shields, top Pentagon officials in battle dress being used as a prop for the President as riot

police tried to remove the Black Lives Matter protesters.

When we lived in South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to greet angry protesters sent to his house by the apartheid government by inviting them into his garden for tea and cookies. They ended up laughing and carrying on. They didn't throw stones. Nobody raised a weapon. I told that anecdote to a senior Pentagon leader who told me he was doing a lot of soul searching the day after the debacle in Lafayette Square. Later that day the National Guard was told to exchange their riot helmets, which made them look like Storm Troopers, for soft hats. They were told to put down their weapons. Pallets of water were delivered to Lafayette Square. A day later the military was ordered by the Pentagon to leave DC.

Class of 2020 – what an iconic class you are. An epic number. 2020 implies clarity. Perfect foresight and knowledge. Instead 2020 will go down in the history books with an asterisk like 1918. An unforgettable year...a year no one could have envisioned with 2020 vision. A fact that will bond you as a class forever.

It brings to mind the Class of 1947. My grandfather was Class of 47 at the Naval Academy and his class, which happened to include a future President Jimmy Carter, had to be rushed through, graduating a year early to be sent off to war. They were needed in the Pacific. They missed their celebration as well because the world was calling them.

Most of you were born a year after 9/11, growing up in a post 9-11 world. You were babies the last time we felt this kind of fear. For me and your parents, we thought 9/11 would be the biggest, most calamitous event in our lifetime – like the Great Depression, World War II and Vietnam. I have spent the past 20 years chasing terrorists. I knew the names of nearly every leader in the Taliban and Al Qaeda. My husband and I began covering Afghanistan in 1993 when we lived in Islamabad. The first World Trade Center bomber was caught near our house in Islamabad. We documented the rise of suicide bombers and the wars in the Middle East where our daughters Annalise and Amelia were born in Jerusalem as we witnessed yet another rough draft of history unfolding. I thought these were going to be the events that defined my life and yours. It certainly defined most of my adult life.

But, boy, were we wrong. Since March, more than 140,000 Americans have died from this global pandemic. More than all of the American troops killed in the Vietnam and Korean wars

*Speech by Jennifer Griffin, Parent of the Class of 2020
August 2, 2020*

combined. More than all the Americans killed in World War 1. Civility seems like an antiquated goal as our political differences are manifested in whether to believe basic science – whether or not to wear a mask – the equivalent of playing Russian roulette with your neighbors’ lives. Civility is needed more than ever. Your generation must bridge the partisan gap and rebuild this country.

You all have phones. You all are citizen journalists. You are already recording and posting images and your videos are going viral. You may not wear sunscreen or make your beds, but you WILL wear face masks because you believe in science and you will vote – hopefully you are going to college in a swing state. You will be recording history and making history.

And finally there are too many amazing teachers to name. But I want to take a moment and acknowledge Kevin Barr who spent 44 years shaping GDS students, helping the school stay true to its mission. I smile thinking of him and John Burghardt meeting every Saturday at the same diner in Bethesda to discuss great literature and perhaps a passage from Shakespeare or Moby Dick. Michelle Cobb shaping this generation of artists, Chris Levy, Nooman Kacem, CA Pilling, Lisa Rauchart and Sue Eikenberry - have impacted all of us during the past 4 years. Along with these teachers I want to take a moment and honor those who have served this community for decades: receptionist RaeCarole Tekeste is leaving this community after 41 years. Eric Ray who provided you with security is leaving after 23 years and Donna Johnson and Jim Stillwell are leaving after 29 and 37 years respectively. Gladys would be proud that you built this community of inclusion. But your battles for social justice are just beginning.

Most graduation speeches encourage the graduates to go out and change the world. But GDS students are already doing so.

When the late John Lewis spoke to GDS in 2015 he encouraged you to make good trouble. He talked about putting two books in the backpack he wore that day in Selma, knowing they would likely be arrested. He wanted to have something to read in jail. He spoke about getting into “good trouble, necessary trouble.”

John Lewis implored you that day in the Forum: “You must never ever give up or give in. You must keep your faith. Be hopeful. Be optimistic. Keep your eyes on the prize. Dream dreams. If you see something that is not fair, not right, not just – you have a moral obligation to speak up,

“speak out and find a way to get in the way.”

When we lived in Jerusalem where Annalise and Amelia were born during the Intifada, we were introduced to the Hebrew term Tikkun Olam.

“Repair the world” A Jewish concept defined by acts of kindness performed to perfect or repair the world.

I was reintroduced to Tikkun Olam when my mother Carolyn produced a play at her theater MetroStage in Alexandria written by Janet Langhart Cohen about an imaginary conversation between Anne Frank and Emmett Till. Janet would always reference Tikkun Olam in talkbacks. Repair the world. Is there anything more relevant today? It applies to every level of our existence. From the ground (earth and climate change). Through our bodies (health, fitness and mental wellness) to social justice.

What will your generation be called: I like Zoomers. To me you are “The Phoenix Generation.” You are going to rise out of the ashes of what we have left for you. We need you to rise from those ashes and do better than our generation. You are the class of 2020. You missed your graduation, but your reunions will be legendary. You still have a lot of work to do, Zoomers. The Boomers, and everyone else, need your help.

Tikkun Olam – “repair the world.” That is your next assignment. And you are well prepared thanks to the dedication of everyone here at GDS.