



## WESTRIDGE SCHOOL

### **Convocation Remarks, Elizabeth J. McGregor, Head of School August 25, 2021**

It is so good to be here with you and to be able to welcome everyone to Westridge—whether you are brand new or returning—and no matter where you might be—watching us from a screen in your classroom, or at home, or peeking into the gym while we try to imagine you all in front of us. There is an excitement about joining together for the start of another school year.

We have demonstrated resilience and innovation over the course of the past 18 months, and now, when I talk with students, faculty and staff, and parents, I hear such a yearning and excitement to be together. We all want to forge a stronger sense of community and belonging. Some have talked about feeling that they took both for granted in the past. Others have told me that they are thinking about community in new ways.

Those conversations about community are at the foundation of my remarks today. The pandemic and so much of what is happening in the world, including climate change, ideological polarization, globalism, racial injustice, and the work to create a more equitable society, have led us to think anew about how deeply our lives as individuals are intertwined with the lives and actions of others—our neighbors, our schoolmates, and even people living across the globe. We can't do what we most need to do without working together, whether this be on an individual, national, or international level.

I know I can't be my best without the love and care and support of others and seeking to understand views other than my own—even though I was raised in a culture and country that seemed to frown on asking for help or relying on others and often thought it knew best.

In the year ahead, I am asking us all to strive constantly to base our relationships and community-building and actions on interdependence, which will be our theme for the year.

Interdependence taps into the concept of “goodness” that has woven its way through Westridge since its early days. At Westridge, we've defined “goodness” as a holistic system of living and interacting that is rooted in being aware of how we are all interconnected, not only with each other, but with the physical world in which we live. It is thinking about how our actions impact others, and how when we all come together, we gain a stronger sense of purpose and can make greater impact—both

of which are at the very heart of what we strive to do at Westridge each and every day.

I want us all to think deeply about what interdependence looks, and sounds, and feels like. For me, it is not dependence on another to the extent that you lose your sense of self. Indeed, it takes a strong individual to rely on and trust others, to take the time to really see who others are, and to be true to yourself within larger groups. And it's more than connection and collaboration. Connection means association and collaboration means working together—both of which are important. But interdependence is deeper and more enduring. It acknowledges a dependence on others—that a change in one part of a group has a ripple effect across the fabric of the community.

Being interdependent means being vulnerable and seeking help, and working with others to explore far-ranging ideas and finding better solutions. It's about creating a community of respect, that is safe and welcoming for all, where we can bring our authentic selves every day. It's in the way we reach out and work with others in our local community and larger world, and find ways to take on the responsibility to deal with some of today's most pressing issues. It's what girls' schools do best for their students—helping them develop self-knowledge and relational skills.

I see and live this interdependence with the people I work with, who work together every day to help me and our school strive to be the best that we can be even during the most difficult times. I see our teachers and support staff working together to plan classes and think about how to take care of our students' social, emotional, mental and physical wellbeing—to create a beautiful campus on which to learn, to sustain ourselves with the best school food ever! I see it in the incredible relationships that our teachers foster and nurture with our students. I see it in our student leaders, in our Upper School Peer-to-Peer students, who reach out to others within and across grade levels, in our Upper School Student Action Council, and in our adult and student tech partners. I see it in the students who are mentors to our students from the Pasadena Unified School District, who are on our campus for our *Partnership for Success!* program during the summer time. I see it in our parent association, our parent grade-level representatives, our Board of Trustees, and our alumnae.

There is a wonderful phrase that has appeared in Westridge literature over many years: "As Westridge changes girls, so do girls change Westridge." That really is interdependence! I am inspired by our students, and the ways they contribute to who we are as an institution and continue to shape the world when they leave our campus. And so, in the spirit of interdependence and seeking input from our students who always have such powerful and profound things to say, I turned to Charisma C. '22 (2021-2022 ASB President) earlier this week and asked her to list the characteristics she thinks of when she hears the word interdependence. I then asked

her to pick her top five and describe what they could be like in practice. This is what she had to say:

**Vulnerability:** *Students can demonstrate “vulnerability” by being transparent and communicative with their teachers or friends when they are in need of support or accommodation. Physical isolation over the pandemic often translated into an emotional isolation for many of us, so it is important we once again get back into the flow of being candid with one another. Uninhibited communication is key!*

**Be Responsive:** *Enthuse over spirit assemblies, your classmate’s history presentation, or even your favorite lunch. Showing your excitement for community events and your interest in those around you MATTERS! It is the accumulation of these positive “responses” that cultivate a more lively and invigorated campus culture.*

**Reliance:** *Westridge students love to sign up for everything in sight. So, cooperate with those around you. Student leaders in clubs, affinities, student life, or more, will encounter particularly stressful weeks when large projects are due, tests from various classes happen to align on neighboring days, etc. The seniors can step up when it is a particularly stressful month for the juniors, vice-versa. The sophomores and freshmen can also do the same. When Student Life plans Town Meetings, for example, there may be times when one group of grade-level representatives may need to take a small step back and the other grade-level representatives can take on greater responsibility. The same sentiment of reliance and support for one another applies for each grade level!*

**Adaptability:** *Be empathetic to the unique circumstances that may arise. Spirit assemblies, Commons lunches, Big & Little Sister activities, Town Meetings, class meetings, etc., may not look the same as they were pre-pandemic. Adapt to these changes and be understanding for when these adjustments need to be made.*

**Trust:** *Trust that your community is here for you. Vulnerability and reliance cannot exist without some element of trust in one another, which is why it is so crucial.*

Both Charisma and I wish you all the very best for the coming school year and encourage you to think and demonstrate the ways in which individually and collectively we can work together, purposely, interdependently, to make our community and the world around us more caring and supportive, and a much better place to be.

As we leave, we'd like to wish you all well, and to ask you to listen to this beautiful rendition of our students from last year singing our school song *Surgere Tentamus*, "We Strive to Rise!"