



High School Graduation

June 13, 2021

Speech by Jim Shelton, Parent of the Class of 2021

Good morning, Russell, Katie, fellow trustees, parents, and other family and friends.

As noted in the program, I greet you today as a parent – one of many parents living this moment together - most specifically as the father of Jameson Shelton, Class of 2027 and of course Justice Shelton, Class of 2021.

And if that still does not ring a bell for some of you, I am Sonia Shelton's husband.

Like many of you, I have given a number of speeches over the years. In some ways commencements are easy because, unless you screw up badly enough to wind up on YouTube, almost no one remembers what you say. But there's nothing like speaking not only in front of your kids but for your kids to remind you what the jitters really feel like... And also to remind you who and what you care most about. So, I am going to just try to make it through without breaking down, after that, everything else is gravy. (Breathe)

I spend much of my time trying to help realize human potential, which means I spend a lot of my time thinking about and working in education. I've spent time in hundreds of schools over the years and my guess is with similar numbers of school leaders and thousands of parents, teachers, and students. I am quite literally a student of the Science of Learning and Development and have had the honor of working with some of the world's leading scientists and entrepreneurs in that space. It is because of that I know that the essential ingredients of schools – the environments, the experiences, and most importantly the relationships - all matter. And, I know intellectually and viscerally what achieving each educational milestone means to a person's life and the lives of any who care deeply about them.

It is because I have those perspectives and know exactly what it takes to get here that I am deeply humbled to stand before you today, at this commencement. And also why I want to offer two special acknowledgments before I really dig in:

The first is to those who are joining us on Zoom. Grandparents and siblings and friends of

many years. We know you should be here with us. In fact, we know you are here with us and we love and appreciate you for it. We are fortunate that our connections know no earthly bounds.

The second acknowledgement is to the GDS faculty and staff. I greet you - those who have truly seen our children and given them the environment, the experiences, and dare I say the love and care to become.

Every day, GDS is made clean and safe and ready in myriad ways for faculty and students by GDS staff who make the space between classrooms warm and welcoming and watch over each child from the time they step out at carpool until they get back in to head home. Even today, they are here and the sound of the authentic pride in their voices as they offer congratulations is a reminder of what they have meant and mean to us. We salute you.

And then there are the faculty. There are no adequate words to express the appreciation we have for you, who come to know our children deeply, who help them find their spark, and who push and cajole them until they know what it is to do work that they didn't imagine possible and that they are truly proud of.

My son, Justice arrived at GDS in 4th grade having struggled in PreK-2 and then taken off at an almost miraculous pace in 3rd grade. He was fine, but I think it's safe to say he was unsure about a lot of things when he arrived at GDS. But then, he was put in Reed's class. And, Reed is to quote Justice "The GOAT." The relationship Reed formed with Justice resulted in him being launched on a transformative trajectory that would be enhanced and propelled by teacher after teacher, year after year. There are too many names to call them out but I do know this – for every name I would highlight other families would call out other teachers' names until almost the entire faculty was being honored for being the difference maker for someone's child. We cannot thank you enough for what you have poured into our children nor express the enormity of our gratitude not only for what you have done but who you are.

Class of 2021 – Justice –

First, I know that may have seemed like a long greeting but I promise I am only going to talk for about 5 1/2 more minutes.

*Speech by Jim Shelton, Parent of the Class of 2021
June 13, 2021*

I have to say I struggled with what to talk about.

I thought about warning you about algorithms that drive your daily lives – because even the best reinforce more of who you were than who you want to be.

I had one version that foreshadowed the clichés your parents use and you may hate but that you'll inevitably say to your children because as you'll learn later, your parents know some things. It was decent and included classics like:

Do it right or do it over.

We do what we need to do so we can do what we want to do.

Or one of my favorites - Everybody wants the juice, nobody wants to squeeze.

But, the pressure of potentially leaving out some parents go-to line was just too much. Plus, I know those are already indelibly imprinted on your psyche. No need to repeat them here.

I had another version that went into how much it means to be a parent. The balance of worry and joy that begins even before you are born. And, a reminder to each of you whether you have a close, passing, or distant relationship with your parents today, there is no one and nothing more important than you to them. And, no matter what critique we harp on or dream we may hold for you that you don't hold for yourself, we are more proud of you than words can express and we are here for you, always and no matter what. But, I know you. And, I know your parents, and I know you know and feel that everyday already.

Finally, I had another version about how privileged we are to be here happy and healthy with clear paths in front of us; when - for so many - circumstances are not nearly as rosy. But this is GDS, we don't need to be reminded of the responsibility that comes with our privilege.

So here's where I landed, and I'll try to make this quick.

You see, given the curses of 2020 there are so many things that could be said; but to be honest, you lived through it just as I did so I won't try to recap or explain any part of it to you.

But what I do want you – all of us - to consider is that it was a gift. It may have been a gut

wrenchingly painful gift – like you were when you were born - but it was a gift nonetheless.

You see, 2020 ultimately gave you something I think history will show our generation, especially those of us living the American Dream, missed out on for decades - you got – we got a stark reminder that nothing can be taken for granted. Everything good – everything - must be fought for and defended vigilantly or it can slip or be taken away.

Economic health and leadership.

Working public health systems.

Racial progress.

Breathable air, drinkable water, fires that can be controlled.

Upward mobility.

Democracy itself.

And the list goes on.

Even going out to eat and seeing friends.

We now know, none of these things can be taken for granted. They are not permanent. In fact, in the span of history they are known to be fleeting.

One of the most used and misunderstood quotes of the 20th century is attributed to Martin Luther King with preceding versions by Theodore Parker, Reverend Seth Brooks, and Rabbi Jacob Kohn. You have heard it many times I am sure.

The arc of the moral universe is long; but it bends toward justice.

Each of those men being men of faith, left to interpretation the roles of God and man in determining the trajectory of the arc.

But know this... the arc of the moral universe does not just bend. It is bent.

It is bent when a man leads his people to freedom.

It is bent when a woman dedicates herself to feeding the masses or takes a beating for fighting for Civil and Voting Rights.

Its is bent when a young girl protests for the environment or a young lawyer frees an innocent man.

It is bent when a teacher sees potential in a child who all have counted out.

It is bent when a child stands up to bullies for a classmate or when a businessman refuses to laugh at an off-color joke.

It is bent every time you choose not to look away, step over, or run away from something that is wrong – big or small. And, when you decide to solve a problem and bring all of your talent, energy, and resources to bear, it bends from the sheer effort let alone a successful outcome.

It bends toward justice when we bend it that way. And it bends the other way not just because of the work of those who actively seek injustice. Never forget – they are and always will be a small minority. It bends the other way, when we do nothing.

Another cliché people say all of the time that you have never heard here at GDS but that somehow has become woven into the beliefs systems of our society is - one man can't change the world.

The simple truth is each man and woman born into the world changes it. We've all seen enough movies about the unexpectedly far-reaching ripples of each of our lives. Thus, in the end, the real question is not will you change the world. The real questions are – for the better or worse and to what degree?

Almost a half century ago, Robert F. Kennedy spoke to this fallacy with better words than I will ever form; so I will close by sharing excerpts from his speech.

He shared these words with the National Union of South African Students on the of Day of Affirmation, June 6, 1966, bringing renewed attention to Africa and Apartheid. He said in a

Boston accent I won't even try to emulate:

Few are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Yet, I believe that in this generation those with the courage to enter the moral conflict will find themselves with companions in every corner of the globe.

Our future may lie beyond our vision, but it is not completely beyond our control. It is the shaping impulse of America that neither fate nor nature nor the irresistible tides of history, but the work of our own hands, matched to reason and principle, that will determine our destiny. There is pride in that, even arrogance, but there is also experience and truth. In any event, it is the only way we can live.

It is the only way we can live.

No one in the world can better determine the measures of your happiness, success, or fulfillment than you. Not even your parents. You will envision and create a world that we could not imagine.

That is why we made you. That is why we love you. That is why you are already the realization of our and all of your ancestors' dreams.

Go get it, Hoppers! And, enjoy every possible moment.