



High School Graduation

June 13, 2021

Speech by Ella Farr, Class of 2021

Hi Everybody! Happy Sunday!

My name is Ella Farr, and I was new to GDS in 9th grade. I can't believe that only four years ago I walked through the doors of this high school, as nervous as I've ever been. Those nerves hadn't lessened by the second day of school, when I wore a brand new outfit, thinking that perhaps it would get me some friends. While I stood in the Forum before classes started, Nadine came up and subtly told me that I had a large tag sticking out of the back of my shirt, and asked if she could tuck it in for me. She did this without hesitation and without judgment, turning something that I probably would've been extremely embarrassed about into just something that happened. She took care of me without any expectation of reciprocation, and that care for one another is a recurring theme in the GDS Class of 2021.

I want to say how proud I am of this grade. This group of people has an incredible talent for making the best of less-than-ideal situations, lobbying for change, and standing up for themselves and one another. If I could choose any group of people to do high school with (especially in the midst of profound societal revolutions and a global pandemic), it would be the 129 people sitting here with me today.

In this class, we have: artists, activists, athletes, mathletes, debaters, readers, writers, musicians, comedians, scholars, tutors, painters, photographers, sculptors, scientists, aspiring veterinarians, aspiring doctors, aspiring politicians, dog people, cat people, and everything in between.

Perhaps more important than any of these talents and aspirations, though, is the fact that everyone in this class cares deeply about each other and this community. Before high school, I was terrified of the competitive nature that I'd heard so much about from TV shows and movies, but from the start of 9th grade, my classmates showed me what it means to be collaborative. I've watched us sit in the forum preparing each other for tests. I've watched us support each other in the gym, pushing each other to our best. I've watched us make each other's days over

and over by small compliments, and being the first one to help when someone drops all of their stuff. And, this class has taught me the power of class group chats -- places where we can vent about classes or ask for help studying. Our grade's power lies in these collaborative actions.

Not only did the Class of 2021 excel at a rigorous high school while still being kind to one another, but we also did so during an incredibly difficult time. I think it's fair to assume that none of us was expecting our last two years of high school to happen how they did. But the grace with which this grade transitioned our community online was remarkable, and, by taking care of ourselves and one another, got us to a place where we all get to be together for this graduation.

We are still nowhere close to perfect, of course, and we must be honest with ourselves about the effect we are having (or not having) on the world around us. Over the last four years, I have also learned from our community that the intent behind our actions does not equate to the impact others feel, or the outcome we have on the world. This has been and still is hard for me, because my impulse is to search for intent, in an effort to see the best in people, and because I hope that people search for the best in me. But, holding one another accountable and making an effort to move away from performative actions that don't actually do good are the only ways to improve ourselves and our communities.

Sometimes the effect of our actions is contrary to the world we say that we want. Today, for example, our three elected speakers do not reflect the racial diversity of our grade, which is not reflective of how valuable the diversity in our grade is to our community. Our intent does not match those outcomes. And, over the last four years, despite our efforts to build an inclusive and supportive community, there were incidents of hate speech that caused our peers to feel uncomfortable or unsafe at school. Again, our stated intent doesn't match our impact. Even in smaller, more day-to-day things, our goals differ from our actions: while many of us care strongly about the environment, our dependency on single use plastics as utensils and carriers actively adds to climate change.

Even as we try to do good, we must consistently push ourselves to do better. We have to be honest with ourselves and with each other about whether our words are turning into actions, and whether our actions are resulting in change or just making ourselves feel good.

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The message I want to leave you with—the message that I have learned from YOU—is that we do have the power to learn, change, and grow. We will be the change that we want to see. As we leave our known space of GDS, I hope that we stay in touch with one another, and that we never stop supporting one another's efforts to become better, and to put good into the world. I hope that we continue to both take care of each other and to hold one another accountable, and help create a world that we will be proud to leave behind. I hope that we use our education and the lessons we have learned to advocate for ourselves and for others. I want the GDS Class of 2021 to continue to be a group that we are proud to have been a part of, and I know that all of these hopes and dreams are possible.

In closing, I want to say thank you. And I want to express that gratitude by trying to represent what I have been hearing and feeling from my classmates.

To our teachers: we are immensely grateful for all of the work, time, and effort you put into each and every one of our classes, especially during such an extraordinary year. You had to reinvent teaching and learning and you did. You are the reason that our families are tired of hearing about our philosophical discussions, or cool physics theories, or hard math problems.

To all the faculty, staff, and administrators who shaped our high school experience: I can't tell you how much we've learned from you. Outside of academics, the support, advice, and encouragement you have given us as we have tried to figure out who we are, what we want to do, and how to support each other have been some of the most meaningful experiences of high school. From concerts to games to food trucks to all night lock-ins at the school, we are incredibly grateful for the experiences you have given us.

To our families: Thank you for supporting us during these past four years. I'm sure it wasn't easy all the time, and that these past couple of years have challenged all of us, especially when we were learning from home, but we are so grateful for everything you have done to help us excel.

Lastly, I would like to say some personal thank yous:

To my family, neighbors, and other people I love: You made it possible for me to succeed in high school. I don't have the words to describe how much you each mean to me, or how much your

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unwavering support motivated me to do and be better. You challenge me every day to see another side, to be less performative and to take action, and to remember that no matter what, humanity comes first.

And finally, I'd like to speak directly to you, my class. To the class of 2021: I know with complete confidence that this grade will change the world. I say this not because I'm trying to be cheesy or anything like that. I say this because I know each of you, and I know that you have the confidence, talent, and awareness of others that is necessary to do good. I am a better person because I have known each of you, and I know that that sentiment will be replicated by the people who find themselves lucky enough to know you throughout the rest of your lives. If my future is going to be in the hands of anyone, I am glad that it is you all.

Thank you.