



High School Graduation

June 12, 2022

Speech by Maddie Feldman, Class of 2022

Hello everyone!

What an honor it is to be speaking here this afternoon. I never imagined that I would share a stage with someone who has fought so hard and so publicly for social equity, someone who's been a leader I've long respected, and who had to jump through many hurdles just to be nominated: Miles Huh. I ask that those of you who need to use the restroom do so now, during my speech, so that you'll be back before Justice-designate Jackson comes to the podium. In all seriousness, I'm so inspired by you and I'm really looking forward to hearing both of you speak.

When I started thinking about what I wanted to say today, I was reminded that GDS is not a normal school. Right? Back in 8th grade, on my shadow day as a prospective Hopper I learned that GDS was unusual. For example, we don't have a cafeteria, but instead a food truck parked outside serving pizza slices the size of two heads put together. Our mascot is an insect. We call our teachers by their first names. Students ask questions to assembly speakers that last five to six minutes. We don't abide by a dress code, shoes are optional. And, school emails are not censored.

How fitting is it, then, that we've just finished four completely unpredictable, unusual years of high school at this unusual institution?

I know that no one wants to be reminded of those many months in solitude, waking up at 8:58am to hop onto morning Zoom classes, but the transition out of those dire times demonstrated to me the importance of showing up.

For the Class of 22, today is like a second graduation, a second separation. The first occurred in March of 2020, when we said rushed, impromptu goodbyes as the world quickly shut down around us. As the lockdown extended, we learned to adapt and stay connected across distance—just as we'll have to do when we head off in different directions in the fall. And after we ultimately endured long months of virtual learning and the strange hybrid schooling that followed, we grew to appreciate the rich reward of being in each other's physical presence.

Yes, showing up remotely for enriching Zooms was wonderful. But more than a full year without Fata shows, the Go-Go, climbing competitions, EuroChallenge trips, the fall Shakespeare performance and Spring musical, Minimester, Sports Saturday, Model UN conferences, First Friday, and crying episodes in the second-floor-gender-neutral-bathroom really highlighted to me the beauty that community creates when we actually, physically come together.

Showing up and actively engaging strengthens the school community.

An editorial published in the Augur Bit highlighted Kelly Morris's farewell email to the student body; after serving as the high school office manager for 15 years, she wrote: "I hope you recognize what a special place GDS is and take every opportunity to connect with each other and your teachers/staff." That connection, that presence, that enthusiasm for our peers' successes and talents—and not just in good times, but also the support network in times of loss and even failure—is what fosters this thriving community.

Showing up nurtures belonging.

The year of standstill made me treasure the exchanges and environments I never really noticed before, but that serve to create and strengthen relationships—those short conversations between teammates on the bus to softball games, the competitive rush to finish the Augur Bit Crossword Puzzle as soon as a new edition is off the press, the quick 'hellos' and 'how are yous' to friends and teachers alike in passing, the commutes to class made longer by admiring the astonishing student artwork that lines the stairwells and third floor.

As GDS begins to fade into the rearview mirror and we say goodbye for real—not "see you in two weeks"—we must draw from our unique perspective having already returned from a separation. Obviously there are reunions, and if you haven't yet received a follow request from @GDSHopperAlumni1945, you will soon. But quarantine has given us the tools to maintain a

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community virtually. Virtual presence is still a presence. And beyond social media, we must stay present and engaged to protect the relationships we've made. By consistently reaching out and acknowledging each other's achievements, by remembering that sense of belonging we held in every crevice of the building, by being there for each other's future life events, both celebrations and in times of sadness, we can maintain this sense of community even when this exact group of people will never again be in the same physical space together.

I know what you're thinking: How do you expect us to maintain intense contact with each other when we live and grow in an ever changing world with unforeseen obstacles?

Well, maybe you're not thinking that, but I'll answer anyway.

At the beginning of September, we heralded the new school year by staging our Senior Run-In outside, as opposed to on the steps of the Forum. On that crisp morning, we set the tone for this school year as one where we seniors modify long-standing traditions in accordance not only with safety policies (like maintaining distance in the forum), but updated values. Running around and around (and around and around) the seated students and faculty, blasting bubble guns, masks secured to our faces, we communicated to the school our ability to reconcile both the timely tradition of ringing in the new school year on Day 1 and also the need to honor values of community safety. Since the first day of this school year, our class—the only one in the school to have had a fully “normal” full year when we were freshmen—became the de facto safeguards of school tradition, redefining normalcy.

In the fall, we brought live theater back to GDS, sporting clear masks for *Marie Antoinette*. We administered our Sixth Annual Summit on Sexual Assault and Consent, hosting hundreds of students and speakers from across the nation with an effective hybrid conference. Morris Stick dancers performed in the Internet Cafe to accommodate distancing restrictions during the Winter Assembly. We showed up en masse to support our highly-decorated volleyball and basketball teams, filling the space with loud cheers and chants to make up for non-family-spectators, who were not allowed inside. We all passionately attended every single Civic Lab Speaker Series. (Ha)

Our student leadership spanned a wide range of disciplines, from affinity spaces to sports teams, and we were largely responsible for the smooth transition from an entirely virtual year of events to a full two semesters of adapting pre-Covid measures to fit in-person safety

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precautions. We have sought to keep the parts of our daily lives that we cherish the most, but adapt them in a way that's more meaningful for the world we now inhabit.

Most of us here are familiar with this school's founding origins, breaking the mold as the first integrated school in the District 77 years ago. As students and faculty have reiterated, citing this founding story is the start, not the end of this school's pursuit of racial justice. But I'm pretty confident that our founders would embrace the work we have done these past four years, in continuing to push the boundaries of GDS to create a more inclusive, equitable institution committed to social justice. In doing so, we have continued to execute GDS's core ethos—where students love to learn and learn to change the world—and applying it to a world that looks very different than in 1945, or even when we started high school in the fall of 2018.

This constant process of evolution and change is the way that not just people and institutions, but societies as a whole, stay healthy and thrive. If we refuse to adapt, if we're stuck with stasis or nostalgia, then those societies deteriorate. Take our Constitution for example; it remains the exoskeleton of our nation, but founding documents must also be updated to address issues society confronts *now* and which our Founding Fathers could never have predicted: a woman's right to control their own body, voting restrictions that erode democracy, how to save our dying planet, horrific gun violence in our schools—119 school shootings have taken place since we stepped foot inside GDS in 2018, leaving hundreds of students dead and never able to graduate as we are today.¹ That is unacceptable. We must change.

Our class—forged by the common challenges and resiliency of the last few years—has learned here, at GDS, the strategies that we must apply to protect what we hold most cherished while at the same time innovating in order to execute our vision of a more perfect union. We will continue to show up and lead these efforts. We've already arranged climate protests at the Supreme Court and pro-choice walk-outs at the Capitol Building. We show up in classes, fervently fighting for underrepresented voices in the curriculum and advocating for minority autonomy in fiction and non-fiction. We showed up just yesterday, marching for our lives at the Washington Monument at 11am and celebrating Capitol Pride on Pennsylvania Avenue at 2pm. We show up through our schoolwork, our visual and performing arts, and our literary publications—all of which give us the tools and the voice to express our anger and our hope. We show up when the Student Action Committee lobbies legislators and testifies before councils, when the Policy Institute tracks maintain year-round dedication to advocacy efforts, and when GenZ4Change

¹ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/school-shootings-over-time-incidents-injuries-and-deaths>

rallies our generation for social causes using digital activism and social media tools that are most resonant to us.

At this not-exactly-normal institution, we are showing up to break norms and redefine tradition to make real change. And if this is abnormal, then we must continue to redefine normal until the status quo is fair and just.

Thank you to every GDS teacher and administrator: you are responsible for cultivating these calls to action, and you have also reinvented education multiple times over, under multiple different formats. Despite what I suspect has been an unbelievably challenging and fatiguing last four years, we leave GDS having benefited from the most enriching process of learning thanks to you all. Thank you to my parents and every parent and parent of a parent here: you are wholly responsible for the growth and development of this beautiful class. Thank you to my brother and to my twin sister, who deserves credit for the one joke I made in this speech.

And to the Class of 22, thank you. I love you.