



Remarks from Head of School Tim Lear Convocation – September 9, 2022

The start of my Pingry career was awkward and unpromising. I arrived in the seventh grade along with my twin brother Chris. But whereas my twin arrived confidently, I stepped off the bus sporting a mullet, oversized braces, and an attitude. As I repeatedly told my parents that year, I didn't belong at Pingry – my friends were all attending Summit Middle School, there was too much homework, and the school looked like the Bridgewater Mall. I was determined to be unhappy, and not surprisingly, my Middle School report card and teacher comments reflected my poor attitude.

Lest you think I'm exaggerating, last spring I went and located my permanent file, which included my report cards and my 1985 Pingry application, complete with my entrance scores, my essays, and my interviewer's notes. As my interviewer (Mr. Boocock) wrote, "Tim is smaller than his twin brother, Chris, who seems to do better in physical sports and in his classes. While I did not detect any great resentment, Tim did admit that they fight often, and that he loses."

That first winter, desperate to reverse my downward trend, my parents agreed to let me attend an AC/DC concert if I agreed to engage in school life and join a team, any team. For reasons that defy logic and remain mysterious to me, I decided to join the wrestling team.

I have thankfully blocked out almost all of my wrestling memories. However, I do remember my final match. Specifically, I remember lying on my back, moving my arms and legs in rapid succession as if trying to make a snow angel. This unorthodox move didn't frighten my opponent, or work, and as I left the mat roughly ten seconds later, my headgear twisted beyond recognition, I was more certain than ever that I didn't belong at Pingry.

And then the next day something odd happened; or rather, it didn't happen. No one mentioned the match or mimicked my tortured snow angel. Life went on, and almost without my noticing it, I began to feel a little less lost and overwhelmed.

Now, if this were an episode of *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, that day would mark the beginning of my transformation into an A student and an All-State athlete, and this transformation would be memorialized in a song titled "He Lost His Braces And Then He Pinned His Twin."

But this is life, not Disney +, and as I mentioned earlier, I recently obtained and reviewed my permanent Pingry file, which shows a path filled with as many detours and false starts as it does successes and smooth sailing. (In fact, I think I still owe Mr. Bourne a Physics assignment.)

So why, if I continued to experience Middle School growing pains throughout high school, did I decide to become a teacher? What inspired me? What gave me that confidence and made me want to come back to Pingry?

The answer is simple: it's the people that I met here, my advisors and teachers and coaches. Regardless of how hard I initially tried to *not* fit in, regardless of my modest interims and my athletic ups and downs, those individuals (and the community they formed) always seemed to be present, whether they were attending my cross country and track meets or stopping me in the hallway to say hello (or, more likely, encouraging me to see them for extra help during CP).

My teachers supported me by being curious about me, by finding out what motivated me and what made me happy (in Middle School, this included largely solitary pursuits, like reading and running and watching movies) – in turn, they inspired me to explore new things, such as AP Government and improv and creative writing, and just as importantly, to share those interests with others.

The faculty invested in me; and in doing so, they fed my curiosity about and my commitment to my classes, my classmates, and my community.

At Pingry, I regularly saw my teachers pursuing goals and having fun, and they taught me that it is OK to try something and fail, because success at Pingry isn't about receiving something but about trying to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. It's not just about effort, but about contributing to a larger effort.

As I shared with the Peer Leaders during their retreat, I love the fact that the Honor Code mentions the word "community" three separate times, urging us to think of others, to join our classmates, and to improve the places and spaces we inhabit.

During our opening meetings last week, all employees had the privilege of hearing from Patrick Radden Keefe, the award-winning journalist from *The New Yorker*, who discussed personal integrity and real-world ethical dilemmas. On this day when we celebrate and reaffirm our commitment to Pingry's Honor Code, it is equally important to acknowledge what Patrick called "the dangerous temptation of success at all costs."

Ernest Hemingway had a great line about how someone goes bankrupt. He said it happens "gradually, then suddenly." The same can be said about the loss of trust, integrity, and honor. It happens gradually, then suddenly. A combination of small decisions that once seemed inconsequential eventually proves otherwise. We might attempt to justify our behavior by telling ourselves "I'll just do it this one time" or "No one will ever know." Unfortunately, there will come a day when you think about the line you promised yourself you would *never* cross ... only to realize that the line is now *behind* you.

Warren Buffett has famously said "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it; if you think about that you'll do things differently." As we begin this academic year, let's remember the importance of the Honor Code, the importance of trust and character, and the importance of making good decisions. Decisions that – as Patrick Radden Keefe said – we would be comfortable justifying to any member of our Pingry community.

This summer I attended a conference for new Heads of School. During that conference several speakers talked about "Imposter Syndrome," which occurs when we question our abilities, and doubt our expertise. My Middle School-self recognized that feeling, even if he didn't know then what it was called; and he would have been reassured, I think, to learn that this feeling of insecurity is as familiar to CEOs and Heads of School as it is to students.

Some of us here, both students and adults, might already have life figured out and are confident in our chosen path and place within the community. Some of us don't entirely have it all figured out yet. And that's OK. Wherever you are in your Pingry journey, you have the opportunity to reinvent yourself this year, to pursue new interests and to find what makes you happy now. And you have an entire community rooting for you and standing by to help.

While I won't expect many students or non-Cardinals fans to know who Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Gibson is, I love his comment that, "The two most important things in life are good friends and a strong bullpen." Pingry's advisors, coaches, and faculty are your bullpen. And we're not just here for your best days. We're here for your toughest days as well.

So as we start the year together, let's promise:

- To show up for one another;
- To attend as many games, plays, and concerts as possible;
- To make good decisions, even when no one is watching;
- To be kind to each other – and to ourselves;
- To ask for help when we need it;
- To broaden our definition of success;
- To let people in and learn their stories;
- and
- To take pride in this amazing community.

Know that while you may sometimes feel insecure or have doubts about your own abilities, every adult on this campus is here to support you.

We want you to see yourselves the way WE see you.

We believe in every single one of you.
And you should, too.

Let's have a great year together.