

## Jake Siesel- Valediction

Thank you so much and Congratulations to the Class of 2023! I'd first like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Hough, Mr. Bledsoe, Ms. Brooks, Ms. Clark, Mr. Dickson, Mr. Smith, Mr. Taylor, B Li, and of course, the lovely Ms. T. Your compassion and wisdom has empowered me to evolve as a reader, writer, and thinker, etching bundles of bliss into my day that I will always cherish. Dr. Edge--you are my work spouse, mentor, and dear friend, trailblazing dreams I once never imagined conceivable. A sentence could not capture the love and admiration I share for my family, so I left each of you letters to try to describe just how much you mean to me. (Excuse me as I switch to Spanish here for a sec.) A mi familia Cubana, lo hicimos! Su fortaleza nos ha traído desde las profundidades de incertidumbre a un futuro de orgullo y felicidad. Nuestra cultura, arraigada en la dignidad, la caridad, y el amor, siempre permanecerá en mi corazon. Los amo a todos. (OK back to English). The friendships forged at Providence Day have nurtured me, enlightened me, and challenged me to improve. I am so grateful to my friends for illuminating the quality of life found in ridiculousness. I love you all. As a class, we've weaved a ceaseless string of achievements, shenanigans, and heartbreak, a tapestry of beautiful memories forever sewn into my heart.

Sitting through five valedictory speeches, I've been unable to suppress the syrupy irony. Have you ever wondered why the biggest dweeb, confined in the chambers of incessant studying and awkward interaction, is the person from whom we all seek life advice? We are social pariahs that lurk through the halls, quivering and quaking for delectable tidbits of knowledge and validation. And yet, we stand in this very place year after year, concocting commentary on a high-school experience we have yet to embrace. Aptly aware of the hypocrisy, I've fallen into the trap. You quickly realize a speech on study techniques or teachers pet syndrome is not brag worthy material for Nana at the Country Club. And so, as with all thrilling tales, I begin at the Boca Raton Country Club.

Allow me to set the scene. Hanukkah 2016. A sea of curly-haired boys draped in sweater vests, each accompanied by their gossiping grandmother. Casual resentment and classical tunes simmered in the air. Slurping my matzah-ball soup, I sensed a looming danger. The elderly swarm inched toward the kids' table and initiated the interrogation. Jen, a notorious golf swindler, asked me what I wished to study. Edna, the country club bridge champion, asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. Keep in mind I was a prepubescent *10-year old* boy. And so, with a matzah-ball chunk lodged in my gullet, I spluttered, "Happy."

We staged an escape for Tio Pupi's Nochebuena (Cuban Christmas Eve). Indeed, my family was Jewish; however, intersectionality traversed these boundaries, fostering a haven for pure love. I clawed for crispy pig skin, salsa-ed to Celia Cruz's soulful tenor, and proudly donned the name 'Judío Flaquito' (best translated to 'Skinny Jew.') These glimpses of humanity, crude and congenial, embodied the joy for which I hungered.

Privilege pervaded my soul. I remained insulated in suburban malaise, attending a swanky private school and basking in my family's gushy warmth. Implicit expectations of the status quo silently shaped my every move. Feisty and in search of answers, I turned to my elders. Saba, my stubborn grandfather whose birthday I share, veiled his inner-turmoil with flashes of coarse affection. Once a bubbly boy in the streets of Germany, Saba fled Hitler's reign of terror for refuge in New York City. (Here's some more Spanish) Mi abuelo, un aristócrata de Oriente, agonizaba cuando los comunistas confiscaron su tierra ancestral. Trabajó en un campamento gubernamental mientras su patria se deterioraba. (Back to English). My Abuelo, a Cuban aristocrat from the Oriente foothills, agonized as communists confiscated ancestral lands. He labored in a government camp while his homeland crumbled to disrepair. My privilege rested on their heroism. Each assignment submitted, each book devoured, each pen stroke honored sacrifices rooted in my identity yet foreign to my cushy lifestyle.

How would I honor my privilege? The last 4 years, I honored my privilege by delving into textbooks with aimless curiosity. I honored my privilege by searching for satisfaction in words on a page. I honored my privilege by sacrificing meaningful relationships for academic validation. I honored my privilege by depriving myself of the high school experience.

In many ways, I had it all figured out in that Boca Country Club. My snarky retort to good ol' Edna rings true more than ever. Honoring one's privilege is not a transactional voyage to the residential bubble; it isn't academic excellence or material wealth. Honoring one's privilege is the pursuit of happiness. Satisfaction can be captured in unorthodox places: in life's complexities, in its simplicities, in the conquest of despair. But we must be liberated from societal expectations to locate our own form of joy.

As we embark upon new chapters in our lives, our missions shall remain steady and our pathways hazy. We must never have it all figured out, for comfort in the unknown fuels unique, soul-filling endeavors. We must never allow privilege to dictate our vision of fulfillment, instead gracing our privilege with the unabashed goodness of a fulfilled life. We must grasp for joy in the challenges to which we owe our stories. The legacy we strive to forge should be quite simple—all we should wish to be is happy.

Thank you so very much. Muchas Gracias.

