



# High School Graduation

June 11, 2023

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon everyone. Welcome! Welcome to the 52nd commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2023. I feel profoundly grateful today, grateful that we can be together to celebrate this group of dynamic, caring, passionate, purposeful seniors.

Graduates: you've had a high school experience for the history books. Your ninth grade year was interrupted by a global pandemic--perhaps you remember. COVID shaped so much about the past four years...and yet throughout, you stayed connected to your learning and to each other. In classrooms, in the Forum, in the Black Box and on the playing fields, I've watched you support each other, challenge each other, comfort each other, engage each other. The friendships you have built and nurtured are a beautiful thing.

As we begin today, I want to call to mind a friend who we wish was with us today, Kamal Nashid. Kamal was a beloved classmate of those of you who attended GDS for Middle School. Not long after eighth grade, Kamal was taking a run near his home, preparing for High School cross country, when he was struck and killed by a car. Kamal's father, Salim, recently wrote to me, "I vividly remember how happy and proud Kamal was when he participated in the 8th Grade Closing Ceremony four years ago. He was so looking forward to attending high school where he could continue to challenge himself." Let's take a moment to call Kamal's memory into this space--to remember a kind, generous young man who was taken from us far too soon.

Thank you. Seniors-I want to talk to you today about friendship. Every spring for the past 20 years I've spent a long weekend with Mitch, Mark & Rob, my 3 best friends from college. We hike in the California redwoods, we talk about our lives over leisurely meals, we play highly

competitive games of Scrabble in the evening. We've now been friends for 35 years, friendships that began when we were your age.

This spring when I was looking for something in my basement, I found a box of letters that the four of us had sent each other, beginning in college and continuing through our 20's. We wrote about our families, who we were dating, our first jobs, our hopes and fears. I had written to Rob in July of 1994, 3 years after we'd graduated from college. I was about to leave my job on Capitol Hill to work at Outward Bound. Here's what I wrote:

*I leave Washington in a month with a better idea than I've ever had about what I want to do with my life. I've realized that my ideal job would be being a rabbi, minus the religion. Why is it ideal? Community leader, teacher, counselor, public service, political activist, hands-on work...these are the things I'm looking for. And so I'm in search of a career outside the clergy that meets these criteria. Other thoughts I've had: to run a political action or outreach group, local politics, or maybe head of a school...I was actually thinking about the school option the other day and thought, maybe Rob and I could start a school together after he has his PhD and I have my law degree. I think we have a lot of skills that complement each other, and could do something good in the world.*

While that letter looks somewhat prescient in hindsight, our letters actually contain a lot of angst. I spent a lot of my twenties grappling with what felt like hugely consequential decisions. Should I go to graduate school? Should I live in California or on the East Coast? Should I marry the person I was dating or should we break up? To quote Mary Oliver, what was I going to do with my one wild and precious life?

In another letter from August of 1991 (2 months after our college graduation), I wrote: *I've been at work for seven days and I feel as though I've been here forever. This 'real world' thing is pretty weird. You wake up, go to work, come home, jog or do some errands, eat dinner, read or watch tv for an hour, go to bed, wake up, go to work, etc. A lot of my impression probably has to do with the fact that I've just started, but, no matter how you slice it, you spend a lot of time at work.....*

*It's not a bad place to work either. I have my own computer terminal and laser printer, three phone lines, unlimited office supplies, voice mail AND computer mail. ["Computer mail" was because the term email hadn't been invented yet]*

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School  
June 11, 2023*

The magic in these letters was that we were making sense of the world together. We were figuring out who we were and what was important to us.

Seniors--take a moment to look to your left and right. I know it's hard to imagine being 50, but you will be, and you will accompany each other on the journey to those future selves. You will celebrate getting your first real job together. You will be at each other's weddings. You will support each other through the loss of loved ones. Your kids may even go to GDS, and you may sit together at their graduations some years from now. For 11 of you graduates, your parents are GDS alums.

On Wednesday night, my daughter Maya, who graduated a year ago, returned home from her gap year. When I went to bed Wednesday night, Maya and a handful of her GDS friends were sitting around our dining room table, talking. When I left for work Thursday morning, they were still sitting at the dining room table talking. I asked if they'd gone to bed--they had not. Those are the kinds of friendships that you have when you're 50.

I want to take you back to April 27, 2023, the day of your Senior Prank. At one point during the day, I walked into the library where you had a band playing and dozens of you were crowded around the microphone, dancing and singing Miley Cyrus's "Party in the USA". It was this beautiful moment of spontaneous joy, of which there have been many over your time at GDS. Moments like those--moments of shared experience and connection, forge friendships, whether you were studying for a test together, running into the Forum to kick off this year, playing chess in the Internet Cafe or simply laughing in the senior corner.

One thing I urge you to take with you from GDS is your friendships. As you're finding your way in life, your friends won't be able to provide you with a roadmap to your destination--they won't even be able to tell you what that destination should be. But they may provide you with a compass, by helping you to discern what's most important to you and then holding you accountable to those values. And most importantly, your friends will give you someone to travel the road with. And that will make your heaviest burdens just a little bit lighter and the transcendent moments, like this one, even more joyful.

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School  
June 11, 2023*

Tend to these friendships. Try writing to each other. If you're not going to write letters, call each other. Text each other. Visit each other. Show up for each other. Your friendships are treasures, ones that only become more valuable over time.

So what else will you be taking with you from GDS, besides your friendships? Several weeks ago, I wrote and asked you this question and received too many responses to share today. But I want you to know that I read and valued each response I received. Thank you.

So, Class of 2023, what will you be taking with you from GDS?

**Asha Adiga-Biro writes,** "I will take from GDS the ability to be me. In 4th grade, after reading the book *Stargirl*, about a girl who marches to the beat of her own drum, I changed my name for a day to "Aqua" and wore a hot pink dress to school trying to imitate *Stargirl*. In middle school, one day I decided to put on a pair of yellow rain boots and never seemed to take them off and no one seemed to bat an eye. At the beginning of quarantine, I shaved my head and one day showed up to Zoom school bald. I don't think I would have been able to do any of these things if my weirdness was not only welcomed but embraced. At GDS one can be who they are and still be unconditionally loved. And although I might not always find that embrace in every space and community I enter, if I am myself, with or without the yellow rain boots, I can be the start of a culture that celebrates differences."

**Mila Noshirvani writes,** "Coming from a middle school where everything was run by the clock, the independence I gained at GDS was refreshing. I felt trusted and respected, and that helped me to develop a sense of responsibility that I know will serve me well."

"I'll also miss the Forum. It was the most overwhelming part of GDS when I first toured the school, but it quickly became a place where I saw a diverse and passionate community gather on Mondays and Fridays to announce the newest club or listen to a speaker. It was a place where I felt like I was part of something bigger than myself, and where I could see the impact that our collective voices could have."

**Nora Smulson writes,** "I will be taking lifelong mentors and friends who are caring and empathetic, hardworking, and curious. I have friends who I argue with and who make me wiser. I have teachers who send friendly emails on a Saturday morning saying, "this article made me think of you," and who had faith in me when others were skeptical. "

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School  
June 11, 2023*

**Ethan Wolin writes,** “After 14 years at Georgetown Day School, it's a little hard to disentangle what precisely I owe to this place. I know it's a hell of a lot, and I know it's essential to who I am. I suspect I care as much as I do about GDS both because of how much my GDS education taught me---and the memories, teachers, and friends it has given me---and because one of the things it taught me is why and how to care deeply about what matters in the first place. GDS taught me that caring about something, itself included, demands critical thinking. GDS helped me grow as an American citizen, not only by familiarizing me with the country's history but also by inspiring in me a sense of school pride that's been like practice for patriotism. A few more specific things I take away from GDS: A love of the sport of running, and with it a life-altering confidence boost for a kid who once feared fields and courts. A love of words and literature. And, yes, true to that good old mission statement I've heard for years---what I expect will be a lifelong love of learning.”

**Pierson Cooper writes,** “The most important things I will take from my decade at GDS are understanding how to have difficult conversations, appreciating and taking an interest in other cultures, learning how to work independently, and the confidence to approach my teachers when I needed their help.”

**Lucy Perl writes,** “I will take from GDS the value of thinking through questions from a variety of different lenses. I used extensions to fully rewrite essays once I had finished, realizing that I wanted to argue the other side. I will take with me the ability to think critically and meticulously.”

**Mackenzie Williams writes,** “The teachers and students at GDS have taught me so much about standing up for what I believe is right, advocating for myself, and feeling confident enough to challenge those around me. I have learned that my voice has power. I have learned how to be a confident, respectful, and bold person.”

**Ava Blum writes:**

I will take:.

- a lifelong eagerness to ask and embrace questions
- an open mind that is ready to listen, respect, and grow from divergent viewpoints.
- a passion for learning in every sense: learning from teachers, learning from life, learning from peers, and learning from myself.

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School  
June 11, 2023*

I couldn't be prouder to be a Grasshopper. I feel loved, nurtured, and ready to leap into the next chapter of my life.

**Jacqueline Metzger writes**, “GDS has taught me the importance of love in all forms. I came to understand the tradition of loving those around you so much that they become your family. GDS did that by filling itself with open minded and open hearted people who taught me that I was worthy of love. Not the required love that a parent feels for their child. Instead, the people here chose to learn my name and sit with me and run across the field in the rain and share a bag of fries and ask me if I’m okay when I look like I’ve had a difficult day and celebrate my wins without jealousy and, most of all, become people I can trust implicitly to have my best interests at heart and who can expect the same from me.”

**Isadora Evers writes**, “When I first toured GDS, the carpet was the thing I noticed. In previous schools the cold tile had upset my senses; it felt as though I was going to school in a sterile office building or hospital every morning. But the GDS carpet felt soothing---maybe sometimes too much so when I felt the urge to take a nap or lie down. The rough fuzz of carpets creates friction, an energy I feel every day I step into the building. Amidst a riveting English discussion on the Africanist presence in Edgar Allan Poe's stories or on a sweaty walk from the gym to grab my calculator still charging in the library, the soft feeling of my feet on these carpet-lined treks made me want to revel in them. I feel secure sharing my opinion in English classes, where I also listen to others and let the sound of great thoughts bounce off the floor and back into my ears.”

And **Daria Kabiri** writes, “GDS allowed me to be me. I frequently walked the halls with wet hair, straight out of the shower, after working out in the middle of the day. I walked the halls wearing clothes that made *me* feel comfortable, not what I thought others would appreciate seeing me wear. I became a more open person who wasn't afraid of judgment. I am confident bringing in five tupperware containers to school and visiting the fridge during nearly every break to eat from one of them and then put them away. I am confident in bringing my giant gym bag that sags as I carry it walking up the forum steps every morning. I was comfortable exploring my hobbies during the school day, comfortable asking for help, comfortable doing my work rather than socializing. I did things for me. I am confident in who I am because of GDS. “

Seniors-what a great list of things to bring with you! Some of you may also take a book that I gave you at graduation rehearsal called *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*. It's a novel

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School  
June 11, 2023*

about lots of things--gaming, identity, growing up--but most of all, it's about friendship. The two main characters Sadie and Sam, meet as kids, like you did. And they stay connected throughout their lives, as I hope you will. I loved the book. I hope you do too.

Class of 2023, as you head off to college and beyond, I know that I speak for all of the adults at GDS when I say that we're deeply grateful that you are in the world and that we've been able to be a part of your stories. We love you. We believe in you. And we are very, very proud of you.

**Seniors...You may move your tassels from the right to the left, transitioning you from GDS students to GDS alumni.**

**And now, GDS community--I present to you the Georgetown Day School Class of 2023!**

**(Throw Caps)**

I'd like to take this last opportunity to say, on behalf of the faculty, staff, and administration of Georgetown Day School, a final **congratulations** to both the graduates and the family and friends who have helped us arrive at this moment.

And now, Class of 2023, I want to invite you to be present. Look out at this extended family, of teachers, parents, friends and more--all of whom are here for you. We believe in your tremendous capacity, we are proud of you. And to all of us present to honor and celebrate these lights, these emerging adults and worldshapers--our responsibility for these graduates does not end today. These young people will need our ongoing support and guidance as they discover the world, make their way in the world, and change the world. Our work isn't done.

My closing tradition is to read a poem by Mary Oliver called "The Summer Day".

### **The Summer Day**

*Who made the world?*

*Who made the swan, and the black bear?*

*Who made the grasshopper?*

*This grasshopper, I mean-*

*the one who has flung herself out of the grass,*

*Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School  
June 11, 2023*

*the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?*

Class of 2023, may you encounter joy, growth and blessing in your one wild and precious life. You have our confidence, our support, our love, and our profound hope for the road ahead.

Congratulations!