



# High School Graduation

June 11, 2023

Speech by Matthew Kaminski '90, Parent of the Class of 2023

Good afternoon, Russell and Yom.

Nadia – your speech reminded me why my daughter loved 11<sup>th</sup> grade English.

Andrew and Drew – I'm reminded of the many times you raided our fridge and grew into such great men. You guys killed it. Andrew, you should think about doing stand-up. What a hard act to follow.

Good afternoon, trustees and parents, family and friends.

And most of all, congratulations to you – this remarkable class of 2023.

I'm Matt Kaminski, the father of Max. His sister Ella, who was in the class of 2020, is also here. Her GDS graduation was a festive drive-through the school parking lot three months into the pandemic. I'm glad she can have the Lisner experience too.

My kids must have mixed feelings seeing me up here – especially right at this moment – but Russell, I thank you for this great honor to speak on behalf of the parents of the class of '23.

I'm also here as a GDS student from a different time. I sat in those seats 33 years ago. The memory of this day – trust me – will be clear in parts and very fuzzy. Like you, we were still nursing headaches from prom and all these graduation parties. There were no caps and gowns; that was too mainstream for the GDS of that era. Like you, we hoped the parent speaker would be brief. Don't worry: Just 10,000 or so more words to go. In our case, it was Eleanor Holmes Norton; some things truly don't change, she now as then represents the District of Columbia in Congress.

In Russell's seat was Gladys Stern. Remember, she'd tell generations of GDS students, "You are smarter than you think, better than you know." That is still a good reminder, for us all.

What I remember most clearly is that my friends and I grabbed our diplomas, changed into shorts and directly from here raced out in a brown '78 Buick to the Delaware shore.

No, Max, this is not an option for you today.

That brings me to an important piece of advice to you, class of 2023: Put on sun screen the first morning of beach week – many of you will be too groggy to remember. Also: a game called “Case Day” (if it exists and I won’t say more) is NOT a good idea.

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The other day at the new Lower/Middle School building, I was looking at the black and white etchings of the other buildings that have housed GDS over its 78 years. None exactly qualifies as an architectural gem.

“Ugly” is the phrase Gladys herself used about the current high school ahead of its opening in 1987, according to the Augur Bit. Like many powerful figures one has dealt with over three decades in journalism, she blamed the press for misquoting her – and in a step available to just a few, had the newspaper confiscated. It backfired: The Washington Post wrote about it, and the whole city knew.

Looking at those sketches, I lingered on 4880 MacArthur Boulevard. I was in the last class in that high school building. There were no Ivy-covered walls here either. Nothing about the front suggested it was a school at all: it resembled a large realtor’s office. Inside were warrens of tight corridors. I suppose we were lucky DC didn’t enforce fire codes stringently. To change classes you had to push against waves of bodies heading the other way. Classrooms had no or barely any natural light. Freshman biology was in something that resembled a storeroom. Down one staircase and out a black fire door was the smoking lounge: You’d find a group there as eclectic as the school itself. Usually some in black leather jackets, spiked hair and piercings – this was a few years after GDS-born Minor Threat had ruled the DC punk scene. Mods. People in tie-dyed shirts and flannel. And those were just the teachers. It was actually a shared space.

The heart of the school was the Lounge. It makes the current Forum seem truly Athenian. The carpet sprang a new strain of mold every few weeks, especially near the freshman corner and the soda machines. Behind the rise against the wall was something called the Trench: It was a narrow space where sometimes younger students were stuffed in by upperclassmen and held there for a period or two. As a freshman, I was terrified of ending up in the trench. I don’t think anyone was ever hurt. In any case the statute of limitations for hazing has surely passed. There was also a Pit and the Swamp, but let’s not go there.

I was in the quote-unquote “ugly” new school for most of high school, and I’ve watched that building double in size – and become more attractive. But as a student and like most alumni, I’ve always sought that spirit of 4880 MacArthur, to notice what’s stayed and changed.

Let me also be clear too: That building was a dump. You have to evolve to thrive – as a person and as an institution.

But it’s a funny thing – 4880 MacArthur showed with such brutal clarity what makes a school great. Not beauty or bricks. We reveled in the fact that GDS didn’t have the glorious physical

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attributes of a St. Albans or Sidwell. What GDS had, as one old teacher put it to me recently, was bountiful intellectual and cultural capital.

The close proximity forced us together. We were always touching – appropriately, usually – in those narrow hallways, in the small classrooms. But because the space was so limited, we also had to *make* space for each other. What a mix we had then. Now too.

This was a space so intimate that it had to be safe.

Now as you know, for roughly half this country “safe space” is used mockingly. And for much of the other half it implies effectively a kind of censorship on views that a few can put out of bounds.

The GDS of the 1980s had a different conception of “safe space”. Anything was in bounds, as long as it was respectful. The head of the American Civil Liberties Union would come in and argue that neo-Nazis should be allowed to march through town. You debated the proposition (and we did, loudly!). It didn’t occur to us to shut down debate.

Times are different. My class came out of high school in the early days of “political correctness.” The public square of today is far nastier, louder and unwelcoming. I don’t need to tell you that. But we aren’t condemned to it either.

My fervent hope is that your GDS education has made you appreciate the need for “safe spaces” that do make room for different perspectives. In other words, the kind of safe space that I am talking about requires each person in it to dare come out of their own *personal* safe space. To be open to points of view that they not only disagree with – and might find insulting or worse – as long as they expressed with respect.

I do wonder how much today’s GDS lives up to that ideal. Almost every GDS alum I know, as you all become today and will see, will question whether the old school has gone too mainstream – too corporate.

I do know you have had spirited debates about its changing identity and political culture. Including this spring in the pages of my first newspaper, the Augur Bit. As long as that’s happening, the GDS spirit lives on. You can’t have a functioning community, much less a democracy, without an openness to dialogue. Now go out there and do your part. No pressure.

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My other lasting memory of GDS is that no one thought they were the smartest person in the room. And by the way, if you’re the smartest person in the room, you’re in the wrong room.

This humility was especially true of the teachers. Kevin Barr, who recently retired, always said GDS teachers took their students seriously and pushed to challenge them and be challenged by them. The point was to teach kids how to think, not what to think.

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My senior year at the Augur Bit, we challenged a little too much: For a story about marijuana use, we ran a full front page *staged* picture of a kid – his long hair obscuring his face – and a bong. The staging crossed an ethical line. Guess what? That print run was confiscated by the administration, and once again the Post wrote about it. At the time the D in GDS if memory serves me right had *only* stood for Day. My apologies, Russell.

When we rejoined the GDS community in 2018 I scanned the list of teacher names and was happy – but not surprised – to find almost a dozen familiar ones from my time.

This continuity tells you a lot about the vibrancy of the institution.

I can also tell you with certainty that you will be lucky to find teachers in the future who you will leave as lasting a mark on you as yours at GDS have.

For over 30 years, I've had an occasional conversation in my mind with John Burghart about James Baldwin, Dickens or the Odyssey that we read in 9<sup>th</sup> grade English. It's good to see John here.

Or with Sue Ikenberry about American politics and history. Often those talks were in person too. She has a habit, as you may know, of bringing her old students back in. So many of us of different generations – academics, journalists, politicians, a prominent poet even – consider her a mentor. None of us accepts it when she says that next year, her 40<sup>th</sup> at GDS, will be her last.

You'll hear a lot of advice, including from graduation speakers. Here's one -- study and copy successful people. I wouldn't do that. Most successful people have traits, often unpleasant, that are unique to them.

Instead: Take inspiration from successful institutions – the values they embody and the way they pass them on to the people who walk through their halls. How they achieve excellence – in your schools, in academics and in their culture.

I've thought a lot about how GDS shaped me and my life. What in practice it means that we have been taught here *how* to think rather than *what* to think.

One of the ways is to ask annoying questions of people who are in a positions of power – that's what GDS students do every day and that's what journalists do.

This school's exuberant embrace of unconventionality reinforces in me the importance of thinking unconventionally. You are entering a world where original ideas – not credentials or old institutions – drive it more than ever.

A small example: I head up a publication – Politico – that came to life only because its founders dared to imagine a different way of doing and delivering news about politics for the digital era. Nine years ago, I joined them to help do something that had never been tried before: To create

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a pan-European publication based in Brussels focused on EU affairs. We now employ over 500 journalists.

This place should leave with you a lasting openness to new ideas ... to dare to imagine a world that can be changed by the force of those ideas ... and, don't forget, to dare ask for all that you deserve to have.

After my junior year at GDS, I was in Warsaw – where I was born – and walked into the New York Times bureau to ask for what I certainly didn't deserve: a job. I was a 17 year old with no clips. But the reporter there, a friend to this day, needed help running errands during a slow summer. Two months later, the unimaginable happened: That August, I watched the Communist government cede power to one of the world's greatest pro-democracy movements that through the power of its ideas changed the world. The Cold War was over, the Soviet Union would soon collapse. A career peak – at 17.

This school helped me understand the satisfaction that you get out of a wandering mind engaged with a fluid world. There are many ways to do that. It hit me that summer before senior year, that journalism and travel were mine – and it has been until now. You search and reassess your whole life. You can find it in many different places and ways.

The world's attention is back on Europe again, just to the east of Poland. I landed in Kyiv in 1994, to take up my first proper reporting job out of college. Ukraine felt Soviet, provincial, with bare glimmers of an independent identity. Most people spoke Russian. Our office manager asked us once, "Will you all be here when the Russians come back to invade us?" I smiled. War seemed unimaginable, as did a true Ukrainian state.

In my engagement with Ukraine over the subsequent decades, the unimaginable happened. More than once. The Ukrainians came together in their open public square – it's called Independence Square (or Maidan) in Kyiv – to bring a truly European, democratic political culture to life. The first time was through the Orange Revolution in 2004. In 2014, when you walked through the Maidan, you felt the desire of a nation to live in a better country unleashed. Vladimir Putin did the unimaginable too: He annexed Crimea in 2014 and started a massive war last year to kill off Ukraine as a state and a nation, which is the great moral and geostrategic clash of this day

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Class of 2023! On behalf of your parents, I want to thank you.

For graduating. We took nothing for granted. I hear there may have been some last-minute community service hours being logged in on Friday.

Above all I want to thank you for what *you* have taught us.

I would certainly know less than I do about rap – and which songs the school administration frowns on these days.

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I've learned a lot about modern DC teen social life. Tenleytown was never, in case you were wondering, a scene in our day. We also knew far fewer kids from other schools than you do. So there are good things about social media.

You have taught us much larger lessons.

Your class felt the full brunt of the pandemic, starting in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Sophomore year was entirely online – though I know we had plenty of company in our house. You tested yourselves more regularly than any of us – for the best reason, to be together as soon and as much as you could.

You taught us about resilience. You showed us what it means to be kind and supportive of each other.

It was wonderful for us to see how you made sure to find time to be all together throughout your final year here. You know each other without the masks we acquire later in life. You will always have each other.

I'd like to leave you with a couple lessons from one of my other favorite teachers, Ben Benskin. He taught 12<sup>th</sup> grade English and among other things, made me appreciate Faulkner.

One day, when someone asked if he had read a certain book, he shook his head and said, "You can't read everything in life. Choose your writers and periods well and read deeply." As someone who works in publishing – and as a parent – I'd ask you to please, please read. Anything would do.

Ben must have been only slightly older than I am now, but I saw him of course as an ancient. It surprised me then when he said with real glee, and I don't remember in what context, that "every stage in life brings its own kind of joy."

I'm sure you have found joy at GDS. I know we as parents have. There is such joy in this moment. In this place.

Congratulations to you all. We love you. Now, don't forget about the sunscreen tomorrow morning.

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