

## Beyond the Shadows

Good evening. Before I begin I'd like to thank Dr. Stimmel, Dr. Criscione, the Sayville Board of Education, the staff, and dedicated educators of Sayville Schools who have supported, guided, and inspired us to go above and beyond. Additionally, I would like to recognize the family members gathered here today. Their unwavering commitment to us all has played an integral role in the achievement we are celebrating this evening.

This may surprise you to learn about me, but when I came into high school I didn't know what the letters AP stood for. Now, I'm certain there are a number of fantastic students who came into this high school knowing exactly how they were going to navigate it... I wasn't one of them. As I filled out my class requests, I probably just seemed like an AP overachiever loading up their schedule, but the reality is that when it came time to make my schedule each year I was confronted with a jolt of fear.

High school is a wild maze and there's no doubt that I found myself lost for the vast majority of it. I remember in middle school I was told about how much my academic and social life could change, but I didn't really believe it until it started happening. I went from being fairly certain of who I was as a person to hopelessly scouring to find myself, which in turn made the whole friend situation that much more confusing. I went from having red, blue, and green teams in middle school to rummaging through dozens of classes I didn't even know existed in high school. So basically from concrete to chaos in one year.

We get it, I was lost. But then how did I end up here speaking in front of you all today? First of all, I would like to thank my dedicated teachers, supportive family, and encouraging friends who kept me sane through it all. You have guided me through life's unforgiving obstacles and inspired me to always put my best foot forward. You believed in me, even when I struggled to believe in

myself. In addition to having remarkable people by my side, one of the most important things that helped me navigate high school was recognizing the delicate balance between structure and disorder. After all, if I didn't get over *not* knowing, I wouldn't be where I am today.

The first time I was confronted with this idea of uncertainty was going into freshman year. I entered high school thinking that the letters SAT meant nothing more than the past tense of sit and ACT was something you did on stage. I also remember signing up for my first ever AP class. It was advanced placement world history. Sitting in my eighth grade social studies class, I didn't really think much of it. Most of the kids in my class were writing an essay to see if they could get into the class, so I decided to try it too without knowing much more about it other than the fact that it was going to be challenging. Nothing really hit me until I went to get my summer assignment including the beloved novel *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and the textbook that ended up being 25% ridiculously annotated and 75% blank after two years in the class. I spoke to Mr. Pace, and told him I didn't think I was well-suited for the class. I didn't know what to expect, and I didn't like not knowing. I was told to give it a try and after getting through the summer assignment, I was almost positive I would change my schedule on the first day of high school, but I didn't. I have no doubt that that decision changed the course of my high school career and will continue to have rippling effects as I move on to college. The significance of this decision has little to do with the fact that it was an AP class and a lot more to do with letting myself be lost and igniting an internal drive within myself to work hard.

Moving away from freshman year, I'm sure many of us started to understand the idea of being lost from our first job experience. My first job was at Claws Seafood Market. I had to work the counter and serve customers, but I didn't know the difference between tuna and salmon. Naturally, I was overwhelmed on my first day. I stood there dazed for at least five minutes watching everyone work seamlessly. I opted to stay in the back cleaning an ungodly amount of shrimp for as

long as I could, avoiding the front counter like my life depended on it. I was lost. Three summers later and I still work there, so I must've done something right. After observing and not being afraid to ask my coworkers how to wrestle live blueclaw crabs into a paper bag, I found my way.

As a senior, the very first piece of literature I read was Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave." For those of you who are unfamiliar with it, it tells the story of three prisoners chained up in a cave. Their backs are towards the entrance of the cave so that all they can see is a wall of stone. Behind them is a fire. As people stand before the fire, shadows are projected onto the wall in front of the prisoners, but they never see what is making the shadow. They spent their entire lives in this cave and know nothing about the world around them. To them, the shadows were reality. A prisoner escapes and ventures out of the cave one day. Walking out of the cave, they are blinded by the light of the real world. The escaped prisoner adjusts to the new reality and is stripped of everything they previously knew to be true. They decide to return to the cave with this newfound knowledge and free the remaining prisoners. However, the prisoners refuse to accept the truth. They plead to remain in the cave, threaten to kill the escaped prisoner if they try to free them, and get their wish to stay. Well, we haven't *really* been prisoners but we are about to climb out of the cave and go into the real world. There will be new perspectives; you may despise some of them or you may just adopt some of them yourself. Either way, please don't threaten to kill people when they offer you their opinion. Understanding and growth begins with listening to the views of others. The journey out of the cave won't be comfortable. We may get lost along the way, but without looking around, we'll never see beyond the shadows.

Looking forward now, all of us, no matter what our plans are for next year, are going to be in an unfamiliar environment. If high school wasn't enough for you to get lost, buckle up because there's no GPS to tell you when you have arrived at your destination. *You* have to know when you've made it. Don't be afraid to explore and get a little lost sometimes. It is our time to define our

future, make a definition of success, and achieve it. To do this, we have to know what's out there, so go wander a bit. As Tolkien said, "Not all those who wander are lost." Congratulations on all of your accomplishments and I wish everyone the best of luck. Thank you.