

Good evening, Mrs. Gillingham-Rivas, Mr. Coyle, Sister Taylor, the Board of Trustees, Faculty and Staff, Family and Friends, and most importantly, my sisters in the Class of 2024.

My name is Natalia Garcia-Hanna. I am honored to speak on behalf of the 73 other graduates tonight. My sisters, look around. This is happening! We did it! And along with that joy comes a bitter-sweet reminder. This is the last time we will all be gathered together. We've played countless box ball games, studied all of Dani Roos's junior high quizlets, belted out to "I Am Who You Say I Am", and it's all gone by faster than Father can say, "God bless you" in the halls.

I could reflect on the memorable moments we've shared together, but instead, I'd like to talk about trees. Specifically oak trees. And you may think, "Nati, what?" but don't you just love them? They are glorious to look at but also vital to our ecosystem. From a tiny acorn, it grows, stretching its roots deep into the soil, anchoring itself firmly. It reaches towards the sky, its branches spreading wide, offering shelter and strength. An oak tree has a clear identity. It is unapologetically wonderful.

But there's so much more to this beauty than we can see. The oak tree's root system runs deep, long, and wide; it is an unbreakable bond- just like our sisterhood. Our Duchesne Oak Tree is a daily reminder on campus where memories are made, and blessings are bestowed. Whether it's where Father Valle blessed your stuffed animal on St. Francis of Assisi's Feast Day, where you performed in the 3rd Grade St. Rose Philippine Duchesne play, or if you have just taken a casual glance at it while walking on campus, it's been there for as long as we have. Whether you joined this community in Montessori, Intermediate, or later in High School, this oak and its foundations have been here all along and will be here long after our final walk on this campus.

I'm not sure I ever appreciated it quite as much as I do now. Its mighty figure stands firmly in the very place that has grounded us, giving us stability and strength. Our roots have been nurtured through countless late-night conversations, shared victories, laughter, tears, and sometimes a little drama- can the 4th-grade glue culprit confess already?

Just as leaves change colors and eventually fall, we will continue to evolve, shedding old layers and embracing new experiences.

But through all these changes, the core of who we are, shaped by our time here, remains constant. A truth we could not have accomplished without some strong roots established by our family, friends, and all our Sacred Heart community members.

Unwavering and strong, we've been supported by our teachers, who have challenged us to think critically, and our families, who have offered love and guidance along the way. They have been and will continue to be our root system, supporting us unconditionally.

Our growth has been shaped by the *Goals and Criteria* of the Sacred Heart. In this way, we follow in St. Rose Philippine Duchesne's footsteps. She embodied resilience and, most importantly, made the power of God's love visible to all. She dreamed of becoming a missionary and teaching those in Europe and America about God's love by establishing a Sacred Heart school in the United States. This role model, a part of our Sacred Heart root system, has inspired us to take what we have learned in this special place and set the world alight with God's love. Tonight, we, the Class of 2024, stand at the threshold of our future. We are moments away from leaving our physical Sacred Heart home - that's actually kind of terrifying to say out loud.

Nevertheless, if we remember the courage and confidence of St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, we can overcome any obstacle life throws our way. It is essential that we remember our roots and the fact that the darkest skies have stars that shine the brightest. As sisters within the Sacred Heart community, we are united by this radiant flame that will illuminate our paths and guide us in our journey.

As we heard at our Senior Retreat, Saint Madeleine Sophie's favorite quote, John 15:5, states, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing." God has been with us throughout our joys and sorrows, nurturing us like the sturdy oak tree nourished by sun and rain, and just as the oak tree's roots anchor it firmly in the earth, our roots in the Sacred Heart community ground us in faith, love, and service.

Some of us started forming these roots and beginning our journey in Montessori and Primary. I remember sitting on the Primary tennis courts in the morning anticipating who would be able to altar serve that week, talking about who was taking Chinese or Spanish in first grade, wondering what was happening in the next episode of Anne of Green Gables, jumping in Emma Remy's pool

at the end of third grade, and waiting for Intermediate eagerly. I just wanted to grow up!

It wasn't always easy, but we learned to love as God loves, fostering bonds of friendship that have endured through the years while being encouraged to be a friend to all. In living out the criteria of *Goals I and IV*, we have not only embraced the diversity of our community but also nurtured an environment where everyone feels valued, accepted, and, most importantly, supported.

And who can forget standing in the Intermediate courtyard anxiously awaiting the raffle to become Student Ambassadors since everyone in our grade applied, talking about whether you were a Soprano, Alto, or Sapralto in the choir, stressing about swimming with the fuzzy caterpillars, having a VSCO girl phase (#savetheturtles), and even making cringy Musicallys.

Reflecting on the Montessori, Primary, and Intermediate years, it becomes evident how each experience contributed to understanding *Goal V*: make wise choices. From the carefree days of playing in the playground to the more structured environment of Intermediate, we slowly began growing up. We

learned to navigate a myriad of decisions, both big and small. But still, I was counting the days till Junior High - I just wanted to grow up.

Learning the cell theory song, which is permanently engraved in our brains, having Kaitlin and Evana's bags stolen in Saint Augustine, and then our first-ever dance in Meli's Hall, Junior High, was a special time. These experiences as well as the Green Fair and Service Days support our community, instilling compassion and solidarity, integral to our sense of responsibility as we moved to high school, highlighting the importance of *Goal III*. I could taste the eagerness to be like the "cool seniors" in high school. We were getting closer to this moment while building even closer bonds. And still, I just wanted to grow up.

And then we finally made it! After Dani Vila's unmuted camera shocked her at our 8th grade Zoom Prize Day, nothing we would face in our high school future could ever be quite as challenging. With our first day being virtual and having the air conditioning break on our first in-person day, we were finally Freshmen. Zoom follies, Ms. Do's duck party, and especially those unbearable masks, I could go on. Then in sophomore year, I think we all remember being scared by the abundance of cockroaches found

at Camp Sparta, enjoying our first class trip, and the amazing ice cream social- I guess it was amazing. Later in Junior year, we received our rings, bonded over Kairos, and endured SAT and ACT tutoring. Finally, one day we woke up. Senior year! From decorating our crowns and cars, applying to college, spending way too much time in the lounge, and enjoying the best Congé ever, it happened. Every moment we've shared has made us who we are. Because of these moments, we learned to embody *Goal//* and have been shaped into lifelong learners.

And just like that, we finally grew up. Still, I wouldn't have minded hanging out just a little bit longer, but it's important to remember that the end is never the end, it's just the beginning of something new. Our time at Carrollton, our time together, has been so special. Now it's time to show the world what a Sacred Heart sister can do.

We have read some pretty major texts at our time here, from Shakespeare to Socrates; however, allow me to quote the words of one of the wisest of them all, Winnie the Pooh, "How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard".

Congratulations, Class of 2024. May the roots of our oak tree continue to support us, the trunk keeps us strong, and the branches reach out to touch the sky. Here's to the future, grounded in the strength of our past.

Thank you.