



High School Graduation

June 9, 2024

Speech by Sarah Rosen Wartell, Parent of the Class of 2024

I am more honored to speak at this occasion than at any other before... and a bit more frightened. There is no more daunting audience than a group of 18-year-olds. Thank you, Clara, for giving me permission to be here and for your curious advice, which I will take...

[put on goggles] ... [NOTE: *this is a reference to senior assassin game*] ... maybe this makes sense to some of you?

When I told Clara that Russell wanted to review my remarks in advance, she gave me more mystifying advice. She said: be sure to turn it in at 11:59 p.m. In truth, Russell said he didn't need to see my remarks, but he did note that Clara's term on the DCC is not over till she is handed a diploma. So, if either of them is dissatisfied, they have remedies...

Actually, my most important goal today is to not embarrass you, Clara, at least any more than I already have. I promise kiddo that I won't dance, but I can't promise I won't cry. [PICK UP BOX OF TISSUES.] I came prepared.

Before I address the graduates – I want to offer appreciation.

My husband Ted and I, and our daughters Ellie and Clara, have been part of the GDS community for 14 years. We have come to understand that... the seeming chaos of the forum, and so many "unique" aspects of the GDS experience, bely a deeper intentionality aimed at enabling every child to find *their own path* to achievement, sparking joy along the way.

The *amazing GDS teachers* realize that vision every day and you model for our children what it means to have dedication to purpose. We thank you!

To GDS's wonderful staff and leadership: You have had to navigate one of the most challenging periods for educators ever. You juggled *our* conflicting opinions and *your own* convictions to do

what was best for the children and institution. Although we didn't always say so, I know how much the parents do appreciate your indefatigable efforts.

On a personal note, Clara was exceptionally lucky to have Leigh Tait and Emily Livelli as her advisors. They are each remarkable champions of all our children.

Finally, thanks to Russell. Through the pandemic, a racial reckoning, and – most challenging of all - neighborhood traffic disputes, Russell has been resilient and steadfast in his commitment to ever improving GDS, keeping his eye on preparing future generations of changemakers.

When I took my job in 2012 at the Urban Institute, a wise GDS parent suggested that I try to learn from the impressive new head. Russell, like me, was tasked with modernizing an institution with a proud past but in need of change. So, I booked a visit. And, after Russell figured out that I wasn't there to complain about the 4th grade curriculum, he gave me a piece of advice.

There will always be a vanguard for *the* change you want to pursue, Russell said; and there will always be those who will resist it. But you should pay attention to those who are just *unsure*. Russell advised that I try to show *curiosity* about their hopes and worries – listen *to them* – and give them a chance to experience the benefits of some new ideas.

In my view, our school has thrived, thanks to Russell's approach to change. I also think I am a better leader when I remember it, and, graduates, I will make the case that this is relevant advice for you too.

But first, let's look back at your journey. In March of 8th grade, you all went home *for over a year*, experiencing more *family togetherness* than any teen should *ever* have to endure. And, when you did come back to school, instead of enjoying the freedoms of an open campus, you wore masks, survived hybrid teaching, and had to eat lunch in a parking garage six feet away from your friends. And yet, despite that experience, or maybe because of it, you built a *strong community*, even as you were finding yourselves as *individuals*.

As Ben and Joe just told us, *this* class seems especially good at celebrating, not judging, one another's talents and passions. The Wartells always knew that, when Clara had a FATA performance, if she went to school happy ...or sad, and no matter what color she dyed her hair, her friends would cheer her on. By supporting each other, you have made our jobs as parents much, much easier.

Which isn't to say that we parents didn't also put in a lot of work:

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- we went without sleep, when you were infants or ill;
- we were on the edge of our seats, when you performed in the One Acts, and every time you played a sports rival;
- we worried ourselves sick, wondering what you might share on *Instagram*; and
- then there was the first time that many of you pulled out of the driveway -- riding solo; we – could – barely – breathe.

Of course, we felt overwhelming pride in you for your accomplishments. But we also experienced your disappointments, as if they were our own. It's just what parents do.

But every loved one in the room would say today that you repaid us over and again, because we experienced the wonder of watching you... become you... (Talking to you, Clara.) We see that you are increasingly clear in who you are, what you want to do, and how you want to do it. And even when those plans change many times ahead, we know that you are now able:

- to set your own goals;
- to know when to ask for help and how to accept it; and
- to determine *your own best way* to contribute to a world that desperately needs your help to chart a better path.

So, be kind to those of us who have cheered and ached with you along the way. Feed us a bone – and give us an actual call – as often as you use our UberEats or Amazon Prime accounts or reply to our text by saying “I’m *fine*, mom.”

Now, let's get to that one piece of advice that every graduation speaker is required to impart. To put it simply – my advice, drawing upon Russell, is *stay curious about others*. GDS has done a great job fostering *intellectual* curiosity; I want to urge you to be especially curious about *people* who see the world *differently* than you do.

Americans have sorted ourselves into like-minded communities: where we live; where we go to school; the media we consume; and even the sports that we follow. Algorithms are sharing with you what they have learned you will like – not what could challenge your understanding.

In such a climate, it just is too easy to put people in a box. They are right or wrong. Red or blue. With me or against me.

Believe me, I know that there are some dark forces in our society. But to make lasting change, you have to bring, at least *some* people along with you. You need to find that common interest

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with others who are unsure. Find that story or experience that opens the door and gives you a chance to persuade....

The Urban Institute does research, mines data, establishes facts, and designs solutions to poverty and inequality. But *we know* that it takes more than just *the best evidence* to persuade others to follow our recommendations. When we remember to listen to those we seek to inform and champion our ideas with both expected allies -- and strange bedfellows -- we often have more success and greater impact. The policy or initiative realized is rarely *just* what we think the facts dictate, but *purity* doesn't house a family or help someone train for a better-paying job. Often, the right compromise is far better than inertia.

So, please don't despair at our politics. Yes, it is less mature than you were when you were in kindergarten on the *Big Toy*. Try to stay curious ... There will always be people whose beliefs are simply too far from your own -- even those whose ideas you need to *mobilize to fight*. But, as Russell taught me, one way to fight is to bring onside those who are unsure about the change we seek. In other words, please feed your passion, but don't let them get in the way of your curiosity about others.

Luckily, I know that we can count on you. Young people have taught folks like me to be better listeners -- to get comfortable being uncomfortable. You have taught us to respect your chosen pronouns. You have taught us to recognize our different forms of privilege. And you have taught us to value the lived experience of others. Curiosity across difference -- it's what you do.

So, when you get to college, and at every other step on your journey, I hope you get the chance to find new friends and collaborators -- from across the globe -- or from across the country -- who grew up very differently than you. And you might just find that they will be your partners in creating the change that you want to be in this world.

[PAUSE TO BREATHE]

It says in my notes here -- "Don't cry."

So, now it is time for your loved ones to, once again, *hold our breath*, and watch you pull out of the driveway *solo* -- metaphorically speaking. Every ounce of our being will be rooting for you. Our celebrations of all that you will achieve -- may be mortifying. And, even when you try and fail from time to time, our love will only grow.

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But know also that we are counting on you to figure out what we have not; counting on you to stay curious; counting on you to build trust across difference in communities wherever you go; and counting on you to shape a better future!

We cannot wait to see the world that you will make!

Thank you.

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