



June 9, 2024

Speech by Benjamin Fitzpayne, Class of 2024

I wanted to start this speech with a very GDS moment in my life. I'd argue it's more GDS than fighting for social change, asking five-minute long questions at assemblies, or running into moving traffic just to get the senior assassin kill. Don't worry—the car was ok. This story involves an overconfident, stubborn 17 year-old making dumb decisions and getting adults to clean up his mess.

One fine August morning, I decided to go on a run in Rock Creek Park. Only, that day I decided I didn't want to inconvenience myself with my phone, and I should just rely on my natural compass. Believe it or not, my brain's compass didn't cut it.

I started my run in Shepard Park. 40 minutes later, after what was supposed to be a short loop, I looked up and saw the Mormon Temple. Not ideal. Yet, in true GDS fashion, I decided I wasn't lost and just needed to make a few more right turns. Long story short, I was lost. That was when I really started resenting Russell telling us my freshman year that GDS students can do anything they put their minds to.

Right when I started to consider accepting my fate and letting the brutal currents of Rock Creek sweep me away, I saw my lifeline. A young couple was walking their dog right ahead of me on the trail. And miraculously, when they saw a random teenager sprinting at them from the bushes of Rock Creek yelling about google maps, they didn't run in the other direction.

They didn't just pull up a map, they didn't just offer me a drink of water, one of them, named Lauren, offered to give me a ride back to my car. That's kind of extraordinary if you think about it. She saw a complete stranger, who she had no obligation to trust, and took time out of her day to help him.

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There's a reason I'm telling this story today to this specific group. I'm gonna venture to say the extraordinary trust Lauren had in her community exists in every single person up here on this stage.

I say this because when she agreed to help out and we started talking, I brought up the fact I was a mighty Hopper. Instead of the classic "ohhhh gaytown drug school" or "didn't Brett Kavanaugh go there?" she said: "no way, me too." This completely random woman who more or less saved my life that hot August morning graduated in the GDS's class of 2008 and even coaches GDS cross country. So all that to say, thank you Lauren Silberman.

What Lauren showed me then was the completely unique piece of GDS every single person who touches this place comes away with. In our community, a tremendously powerful trust exists. I see it every time I set foot on campus, and I especially see it in the class of 2024. As we go forward, that's the piece of the GDS community I hope every single person takes with them.

In our community, this trust allows for kindness, safety, and a uniquely GDS joy. This trust carried us to this point as the class of 2024. I came to GDS as a new freshman during covid. My very first lunches were in the cold LMS garage right up there sitting at socially distanced desks in lunch groups with classmates who were complete strangers to me. I was absolutely terrified. Yet, in what was possibly the worst scenario for making friends, people scooted their desks closer, they reached out to anyone and everyone around them, and I saw the trust that would anchor our grade for the next four years. We trusted each other enough to ignore the very real embarrassment that accompanies freshman year, and began the process of building the community we see on stage right now.

That trust hasn't only made us close. It created a culture of pride in each other that has grounded our grade over the last four years. We filled the stands for Volleyball, as they won DC states not once but twice. We packed the house for men's basketball, as they... as they... did what GDS Men's basketball does. This year, we showed out and sold out Fata for the first time in four years. One day, seven people in our grade showed up for the History Speaker Series without the promise of an EL. For those who don't know, that means seven seniors went to an afterschool history lesson just for fun. I mean... that's impressive. In everything from Cabaret to Monday Meeting announcements, our grade showed up and cheered. We trusted that—no matter if we're cheering or being cheered for—we have people standing beside us who will always be on our team.

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Our senior year has taken this trust even further. In our final year together, instead of closing ourselves off, we trusted each other enough to make new friends and new connections as a grade. From the class trip to senior assassin, we came together in a really impressive way. And shoutout senior group chat. If nothing else shows the trust we built, let's talk about how half of our grade felt comfortable enough to send all-grade messages planning everything from senior week psychs to buying the biggest ball pit to ever grace the GDS forum. Our grade trusted our connection and bought-in, and it was hugely impressive.

Now, as we're supposedly adults, I've been thinking a lot about how we can replicate that trust wherever the future takes us. And I can tell you with complete confidence that I have no idea. The only conclusion I've come to is that it's impossible to replicate the GDS community, because no matter what you think about GDS, no one can deny it is completely unique.

Then, I realized that could be the point. Despite our cohesion, every single one of us will take away different pieces of the trust we've found in this community. So I can only tell you what parts of the GDS trust I'll take with me.

I'll remember the trust I found in GDS whenever I feel pressured to be anything besides myself. Before GDS, I was deeply afraid of being vulnerable, yet at GDS, I found a place where sharing your full self was celebrated. It was a place where I could come out, a place where I could grieve, and perhaps most importantly a place where my pants could rip down the crotch in the senior corner, photos could end up on three people's private stories, and I could still show my face at school the next day. GDS is a place where anyone can be proud to be anything. I truly hope that we'll all continue to trust others with vulnerability and authenticity, no matter where we go.

I'll use the trust I found in GDS to support others. Our community taught me that hearing people out and trusting what they have to say—no matter how unconventional—is always a good idea. That's how we ended up with senior assassin. It may also be how we ended up with a Bruno Mars impersonator introducing our senior class, but that's besides the point. The bravery it takes to trust what others have to say isn't always easy to find, and I hope we can create more of it.

Lastly, I'll remember this class when it comes time to find some trust in the world. The world is cold and hard and depressing. Our beloved marxist indoctrination camp will be the first to tell

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you that. It is so easy to see all the horror that surrounds us and give up. Instead, I'll trust goodness. The goodness that I learned about in GDS History and English. The goodness I saw when Sue Ikenberry brought our class tea and cookies every time we met last year. And the goodness I experienced every single day just existing in the class of 2024. The world is hard, but I trust the good. And that's in no small part due to the goodness I've seen over the last four years.

I can't demand or expect that you guys will remember this speech past next week. But I have complete trust that you'll all take your own pieces of our community with you in the future. I trust that the next time you see a random kid lost in Rock Creek Park, you'll lend a hand. There is no one I trust more than you to carry on our legacy and make the world a better place.

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