High School Graduation

June 8, 2025

Speech by Kakenya Ntaiya, Parent of the Class of 2025

Good afternoon, everyone.

It is a joy and an honor to stand before you today as we celebrate the extraordinary Class of 2025. Russell, thank you for giving me this opportunity to represent my fellow parents. I'm especially proud to be here for one graduate in particular—my son, Nathan. The same young man who once tried to convince me that video games counted as "math and reading," and who now stands here—taller than me, wiser than I expected, and full of promise.

Before I speak more about Nathan, I would like to take a moment to express my heartfelt thanks to Georgetown Day School—a place that not only educated our children but also empowered them. The teachers, coaches, and staff recognized their potential and created an environment where they could explore, thrive, and grow. You challenged our kids, cheered them on, and helped shape the remarkable young women and men we celebrate today. For that, we are deeply grateful.

GDS has also been an extraordinary place because of how it brings learning to life. This school has exposed our children to real-world issues and invited them to be active participants in shaping a better world. I was amazed to see the students organize and run the Consent Summit, born out of the Policy Institute—turning what could have been just a class project into a platform for advocacy, conversation, and impact. And then there's the Minimester, which encourages students to find connection through shared experience, to go beyond the classroom and into the community—learning by doing, by listening, by stepping outside their comfort zones.

Watching Nathan take advantage of those opportunities has been deeply moving. These are things he would have never experienced had he not come to GDS. Whether it was engaging in a deep conversation on social justice, attending an off-campus program, or simply connecting with classmates in new ways—the outside-the-classroom experiences here have helped our sons and daughters find

meaningful ways to relate to the world and to each other.

These are the very skills you will need as you go out into college—and into life beyond. The ability to listen, to lead, to collaborate, to empathize, and to take action with courage and curiosity. GDS has not just prepared you for tests and essays—it has prepared you to make a difference.

To my son: Watching you grow into the person you are today has been one of life's greatest gifts. You've met every challenge with determination, every disappointment with grace, and every new chapter with an open heart. One of the moments I'll always cherish is when you truly found your rhythm—in track and field and cross country. I remember the discipline, the early morning runs, in the rain and snow, the sweat, the setbacks, and the victories. Watching you take off on those long distances—focused, grounded, and determined—was watching someone becoming himself. You didn't just run—you excelled. You showed us what resilience, dedication, and quiet strength look like in motion.

As a parent who was raised and educated in a different part of the world, I've come to deeply appreciate the values that GDS has instilled in our children. This community encourages independence, nurtures critical thinking, and gives students the freedom to explore who they are and what they care about. Our kids have grown in an environment that challenges convention, values curiosity, and recognizes that learning happens both inside and beyond the classroom. For that, I am deeply grateful—not only for the diploma Nathan receives today, but for the person he has become along the way.

For those of you who don't know me— I was born and raised in rural Kenya, in a Maasai village where the future for girls was determined long before they could dream for themselves. I grew up in a place where girls were expected to marry young, take care of the home, and serve others in silence. A girl's place was in the kitchen and in the fields. I woke up every morning to fetch water from the river, milk cows, and complete chores before walking to school—while the boys drank tea and ran ahead. The school system back then did not encourage questioning. If you challenged a teacher, you got in trouble. When a teacher entered the classroom, we stood and only sat when we were told. We called them "Sir," "Madam," or "Teacher So-and-So." So, yes—imagine my shock when I came to GDS and learned that students call their teachers by their first names! It took me a long time to accept that.

And then came the moments where our children had to decide what they wanted to pursue. Nathan took that to heart. I'

ve been reminded many times: "*Mom, it's my life. My college. My future.*" That sense of independence, of self-determination—is something I never experienced growing up. But I've come to admire it. I've learned from it. And I'm grateful that my son, and so many of your children, have been nurtured in a place that makes space for that kind of personal growth.

But while we celebrate this milestone, we must also acknowledge the disparities that persist in educational access around the world. In communities like the one I grew up in, many girls still face tremendous barriers—early marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), poverty, and social norms that discourage their dreams. These challenges are not abstract to me—they are personal. They are why I founded Kakenya's Dream, a nonprofit that supports girls' education, health, and leadership in rural Kenya. And they are a constant reminder that every diploma, every graduation, every dream fulfilled—is both a privilege and a responsibility.

We also know the world is changing in difficult ways. I grew up in a country where women had no property rights and could not choose who to marry. And it breaks my heart to see some of those same rights being questioned here in the United States in 2025.

In moments like these, I turn to the wisdom of our Kikuyu heritage - one of the tribes in Kenya, Nathan's dad is Kikuyu, which teaches:

"Greatness is born of perseverance."

Class of 2025—your journey has been one of perseverance. You have had the opportunity to grow in a system that opened doors, but your path has not been easy. You navigated a global pandemic. You learned through screens and masks. You pushed through academic and personal challenges. And you did it with quiet strength, resilience, and grace—embodying the greatness our ancestors spoke of.
And from our Maasai tradition, we are reminded:

"Children are the reward of life."

You—our sons and daughters—are our greatest gifts. You are the dream of generations past, and the hope of generations to come. You carry with you the spirit of community, the fire of courage, and the humility that makes leadership meaningful. Your success is not just yours—it is shared with all who walked before you and all who will look up to you.

Let me offer you a few parting words of advice, drawn from my own journey and from

yours:

- Know where you come from. Your heritage is not just history—it's strength.
- Lead with empathy. The world needs more compassion now than ever, and that starts with you.
- Keep moving forward, even when the race is long. Like I saw Nathan do in cross country, sometimes the hardest part is in the middle—but that's where champions are made.
- Success is not about standing out—it's about lifting others as you rise. Always hold someone else's hand.
- And yes—call your parents. We want to hear your voice, even if it's just to say, "I'm out of laundry detergent.

"As you take your next steps, I leave you with words that have always inspired me—words that speak to the power that lies within each of you when you stop holding back and start fully showing up in the world:

"Our Deepest Fear," a poem by Marianne Williamson

> *Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.*
> *Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.*
> *It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.*
> *We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?*
> *Actually, who are you not to be?*
> *You are a child of God.*
> *Your playing small does not serve the world.*
> *There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.*
> *We are all meant to shine, as children do.*
> *We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.*
> *It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.*
> *And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.*
> *As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

And as you step into the world beyond this campus, I want to be honest with you: it's not always as open as it should be. Even here in America, education is becoming more controlled. Books are being banned. The space for honest, respectful dialogue is shrinking. The freedom to question, to speak openly, and to grow through difference is under pressure. It will be up to you to protect that space and exercise what you have learnt from GDS. Continue to speak up when it's hard. Ask questions when it's uncomfortable. Make room for voices different from your own. Because the future of a

free and fair society depends on your courage to keep learning—and your willingness to listen.

Class of 2025, you've made us proud in more ways than you know. Keep walking your journey—with courage, integrity, and strength.

And finally, a shout-out to amazing mom friends who have walked this journey with me: Heath, Jennifer, Jen, Ana, and Gretchen—we made it!

To the Class of 2025: You are ready. Go boldly, and don't forget where you started. We love you!

Thank you.

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