



PROVIDENCE DAY SCHOOL

Commencement Address to the Class of 2026

Jeff Gordon, Trustee, PD Parent '26 '29

Class of 2026... after all the hard work, dedication, and sacrifices, here you are.

Congratulations...you did it.

As parents of our very own graduate, Ella, my wife Ingrid and I have experienced firsthand just how special Providence Day School is. Watching these students grow, mature, and prepare for what comes next has been incredibly rewarding.

And none of that happens without a great team behind the scenes.

To the teachers, administrators, coaches, parents, families, and mentors who helped guide these students to this moment...thank you. The impact you've made will last far beyond today.

Now, I have to admit... standing here giving a commencement speech feels a little surreal for me.

I've stood in front of packed grandstands with hundreds of thousands of people watching. I've raced wheel-to-wheel at nearly 200 miles an hour. I've handled pressure in some of the biggest moments in sports.

But this? This is different. And honestly, far more terrifying.

In fact, when I was first approached to do this, my initial thought was, "Are you sure you have the right guy?"

I never went to college. Most commencement speakers have advanced degrees...the only degree I've come close to is the 32-degree banking at Daytona.

Seriously though, I'm honored to be here so thank you PD.

When I was your age, I had one very clear dream:...to drive racecars for a living.

That was it.

I didn't have a backup plan. I didn't have a degree waiting for me. I didn't have some perfectly mapped-out roadmap for life.

What I did have was a dream, a passion for racing, and a belief that if the right opportunity came along at the right time, I could turn that dream into reality.

It wasn't easy.

In racing, no matter how talented you are, you lose far more than you win.

Over my career, I was fortunate enough to win 93 races in NASCAR's premier series, the third-most in the history of the sport, which sounds pretty impressive...until you realize I competed in over 800 races.

Which means only about 10% of the time I left the track satisfied with the result.

The other 90% of the time, I left knowing there was still more to learn, more to improve, or feeling like I had let my team....or myself...down that day.

And honestly, I wouldn't have wanted it any other way, because the difficult days often taught me more than the victories ever did.

There's something about climbing into a racecar that changes your perspective immediately.

The belts are pulled uncomfortably tight, so much so you can barely breathe... and then you give them one more tug just to make sure.

You reach up and fire the engine, and suddenly 800 horsepower is vibrating through your chest.

The green flag drops. Your hands lock onto the steering wheel. The pace builds instantly...100 miles an hour, then 150... and within seconds you're traveling over 200 miles an hour with cars inches in front of you, beside you, and behind you.

In that moment, your world becomes very small and very focused.

The seat belts in a racecar weren't just there to keep me safe. They connected me to the car... an essential tool I depended on to win.

I needed to feel everything the car felt. Every vibration. Every bump. The instant the tires started to lose grip.

At my best, it felt like the car and I were one. And over time, I realized something:

The things that make you uncomfortable aren't always there to hold you back. Sometimes they're the very things keeping you connected, grounded, and aware.

The pressure, setbacks, responsibilities, and difficult moments in life...aren't just obstacles to overcome. Often, they're the moments teaching you the most, sharpening your instincts, and preparing you for what comes next.

Don't spend your life trying to avoid discomfort. Learn from it. Stay connected to it.

Because growth usually happens when you're fully engaged, fully aware, and willing to feel every part of the ride.

Racing also taught me that every lap is an opportunity to improve.

Even after wins and championships, we'd spend hours studying every corner, every mistake, every tiny adjustment that could make the next lap or the next race just a little better.

Most growth doesn't happen all at once.

It happens in small improvements repeated consistently over time.

A better decision.
A little more effort.

Learning from yesterday instead of repeating it. And a racing season is long.

There are weeks when you feel unstoppable... and weeks where you question everything.

Racing teaches you quickly that setbacks are part of the journey.

Bad races happen.
Mistakes happen.

Disappointment happens.

But those difficult stretches are often the moments preparing you for something bigger down the road.

And maybe that's the biggest lesson timing has taught me.
In racing, timing is everything.

Trying to win the race on the first lap rarely works. Sitting back and waiting for an opportunity to magically arrive usually doesn't work either.

The best drivers learn patience. They stay prepared. And when the moment comes and the timing is just right, they make their move.

Life works the same way.
Some of you already know exactly what comes next.
Some of you probably have no idea.
And honestly, that's okay.

Not everybody's journey unfolds at the same speed.

What matters is that you keep moving forward.
Keep learning.
Keep improving.
One lap, one day, one season at a time.

And if there's one thing I hope stays with you long after today, it's one simple word:
DRIVE.

Not just because racing became my life... but because I believe the way you choose to DRIVE through life matters.

So as you leave here and begin this next chapter, here's what DRIVE means to me.

D — Dream: Dream before you have all the answers. Dream before the timing feels perfect. Some of the best opportunities in life begin long before the roadmap is clear.

R — Respond: Life will challenge you.
You'll face setbacks, pressure, disappointment, and moments that test you.
What defines you isn't avoiding adversity...it's how you respond to it.

I — Invest in People: Nobody succeeds alone.

Teachers. Coaches. Parents. Mentors. Friends.

Great teams create great outcomes, and the relationships you build along the way will matter more than you realize.

One of my favorite quotes and one we have displayed at Hendrick Motorsports is:

“Teamwork is the fuel that allows common people to achieve uncommon results.”

V — Value the Journey: Ninety-three wins sounds incredible, until you realize there were over 800 races.

Growth happens in the losses, the preparation, the discipline, and the persistence required to keep showing up.

E — Execute: At some point, preparation has to turn into action.

The people who accomplish extraordinary things aren’t always the most talented... they’re often the ones willing to act when the opportunity arrives.

Your time is now.

The windshield in front of you is wide open.

Where you go from here...and how you choose to spend your time...is entirely up to you.

Life moves fast.

One day you’re sitting where you are now wondering what comes next... and before you know it, years have passed and you’re looking back wondering where the time went.

So take chances.

Work hard.

Be willing to fail.

Stay humble through success.

Learn from disappointment.

And don’t wait for the perfect moment or absolute certainty to make your move.

Because someday, years from now, you won’t remember every grade, every test, or every moment of certainty.

But you will remember the risks you took, the people you impacted, the challenges you overcame, and the moments where you had the courage to bet on yourself.

Congratulations, Class of 2026.

Now go make your laps count.