



High School Graduation

June 9, 2024

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon everyone. Welcome! Welcome to the 53rd commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2024. Today we get to celebrate this group of insightful, funny, passionate, compassionate, courageous, purposeful seniors. What a privilege it is to mark this moment together.

My son Caleb graduated from GDS in 2020--the only Zoom graduation in GDS history. Last month Caleb called from college to tell me that he had run a sub 2-hour marathon. He immediately had my attention, because as far as I knew, no human in history has run a sub-2 hour marathon. In October, Kenyan athlete [Kelvin Kiptum](#) set a world record at the Chicago marathon, finishing in 2 hours, 35 seconds. Tragically, Kiptum died in a car accident four months later. And yet no one has finished under 2 hours. So I asked Caleb how he managed it. "I had help", he told me.

It turns out that Caleb and 19 of his college friends--all athletes--decided that they would run a marathon as a relay. They would each sprint a 200 meter leg, which is half a lap around the track, and then tag the next runner who would run their own 200 meter leg and so on. Each runner had approximately 8 minutes of rest before their next sprint. They finished their marathon in just over one hour and fifty-five minutes. It's remarkable to me that these 20 college athletes, running as fast as they could for short spurts, were barely able to beat the time of one human being running more than 26 miles by himself.

I loved this story because their undertaking, which they did because they were curious--and because they thought it would be fun--was a beautiful act of teamwork, but also, in a way, a beautiful act of empathy. None of these 20 individuals will ever run a sub two hour marathon, and yet, maybe they could begin to imagine what it means for someone else to do so. Maybe

they could stretch their perception to experience the world as someone else does, if only for 25 seconds at a time.

How do you work with a group of people to achieve something extraordinary, like Caleb and his friends did on a Sunday in May?

How do you achieve something extraordinary on your own, like Kiptum did in setting a world record?

And how do you engage in acts of imagination, trying to see the world through someone else's eyes?

Graduates, my hope is that at GDS we have prepared you for each of these things--to be a good teammate when it's called for, to set your own pace and blaze trails when you're inspired to do so, and to move through the world always curious about how others are experiencing it.

These are skills I hope you are each taking with you from GDS. They will serve you well in college and beyond. So, graduates what else will you be taking with you? Several weeks ago, I wrote to you and asked this question and here's some of what you had to say:

Talia Berger, Ila Dohrman, Sotiria Jackson, Juju Jinich, Amelia Oscherwitz, Rand Poellnitz, and Joseph Stocker all wrote to say that they would take from GDS a love of learning.

Olivia Brown, Bea Lazerow, and Lina Fawaz said they would take the ability to advocate for things they believe in.

Shaan Desai, Joe Finkelstein and Lexi Rabasco said they would take confidence in their ability to tackle challenges and ask big questions.

Posy Brown, Christian Charles, Maya Cruz-Hubbard, Matt del Guercio, Curan Palmer, Claire Simon and Raphael Wolf named an appreciation for the GDS community and the friendships they formed.

And seniors, here are some of your specific reflections.

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Annabel Hilzenrath writes, “I’ve made lasting friendships by talking to random people in the forum. I’ve made lasting friendships with teachers by walking into the faculty lounge and getting yelled at by them. I made lasting friendships in the high school office when my friend and I decided to do homework there because why not—we were welcome. GDS has so many pockets where you can find people, and they’re all happy to be found. It’s a special spirit and attitude, one which I will take with me.”

Oliver Thomas writes, “GDS taught me how to be a leader and advocate for myself and others. I helped organize a robotics service trip to Brazil last summer, and only thought this was possible because I had seen other GDS students do similar things in the past. It seemed like a crazy idea but GDS showed me, through example, that if you put enough work into something, you can achieve it.”

Anna Shesol writes, “My GDS teachers taught me that instead of shying away from the big questions, we should revel in the confusion that comes from unpacking complicated ideas-- we should find excitement in the unknown, because that’s often where the most meaningful discoveries lie. Time and again, my teachers have heightened my intellectual curiosity and ignited a passion for literature, history, law--and even sometimes math. I’m thankful for each teacher who pushed me to become a more thoughtful, fearless presence in the world.”

Navin Desai writes, “At GDS I learned how to be for something more than myself. I’ve been fortunate to work with many clubs and organizations at GDS that have called me to put forth my best effort without any tangible personal reward. From the Student Action Committee and Spoken Word club, I learned to extend my arm outward even when I felt vulnerable. When battling for the MAC banner in track, I put my body on the line when I wasn’t sure whether my personal race would impact our team’s standing. When I asked Anthony Belber for life advice during the DC State Track Championships, he said that you will always be most motivated when you are for something bigger than yourself.”

Clara Yu writes, “I will take from GDS a love for sitting down and starting a conversation with whoever happens to be next to me, a love for curious and open-minded people, and a desire to keep connecting, relating, and learning.”

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Robert Koukios writes, “I will take the kindness I experienced at GDS, a loving positive community of people who help each other whenever possible.”

Anna Belber writes, “I will take what felt like hours waiting for my dad to stop talking to third graders, highschoolers, alumni, teachers, or parents. I will take hours hearing my closest friends’ laughs, hours reading incredible books that I couldn’t put down, hours hanging out in the library chairs with friends until we lifted up our feet for the custodial crew and realized that the building was about to close, hours of FATA rehearsals in the cramped dance studio, hours of late nights as I worked to finish an essay I should’ve finished earlier, hours hunched over a pottery wheel, hours of stretching on the field after a long run, hours of working in the shop to build stairs and platforms, hours of walking out of school knowing I have people in my corner, and hours of sitting home over breaks missing my friends.”

Nico David-Fox writes, “I have been inspired by the deep commitment of my GDS friends, who participated in sports, math competitions, shows, studio arts, volunteering, advocacy, debate, and much more. GDS fosters an environment where students are motivated by the example of others to pursue the highest levels of whatever they are most passionate about.”

Tess Madnick writes, “This year I started making choices to curate closer friendships with peers, and pushed myself to take risks socially that I had previously been unwilling to attempt. It was definitely not an easy jump - I’ve always been introverted and in the past have relied on sports to help connect with other people my age. But to my surprise (and delight) I was able to create new friendships. This is what I am taking away - the ability to make choices, and to evolve. I am so grateful to GDS for allowing me to foster those choices, and allow me to pursue my passions outside of school as well as within. “

And Avram Shapiro writes, “I remember the debate that used to explode around the time of the Passover assembly every year because of the song we sang which featured the infamous line “nobody’s different from me!” How could we claim that nobody was different from anyone else when the GDS we knew spent so much time championing the importance of recognizing and celebrating differences, from different family structures to different skin colors to different genders? I remember a bunch of us complaining about the line in class and our teacher, with poised calm, volleying back that just as much as we emphasized difference at our school, we also emphasized that our similarities transcended our differences, that we could--no, we *had*

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to--connect with one another across difference and find greater humanity and perspective in one another. This point--made to us by an adult who is fuzzy in my memory, but honestly could have been any number of amazing, insightful teachers I had in lower school--crystallizes a lot of what has made the GDS community so valuable to me. When I'm engaging with someone else, whether inside or outside the classroom, I've learned to point out the gaps in people's understandings of each other that have their foundations in our fundamental differences from and misapprehensions about one another, while also embracing the ways those gaps are filled in surprising and almost miraculous ways by our shared humanity. At GDS, we learn that we can criticize something and love it just the same. It's what makes a truly positive, welcoming community for all who take part in it, and it's the kind of value that I want to carry on wherever life takes me."

Seniors-what a great collection of things to bring with you from GDS! Some of you may also take a book that I gave you at graduation rehearsal called *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*. The novel tells the story of the Black and Jewish residents of a neighborhood called Chicken Hill in the early part of the 20th Century. It's a book that raises some quintessentially American questions, questions that Avram raised in his reflection--how are we different from each other, and what are some of the things that we share that allow us to transcend those differences? How can we honor the breadth of unique experiences and stories in our nation and how might we challenge ourselves to imagine that each one of these stories resides within us? This isn't easy to do--in the novel or in life. People misunderstand each other in the book, just as we do. People make assumptions about each other based on identity, just as we do. Divisions by race, class and religion in the book make it challenging for characters to see and know each other, and to allow each other to be known and seen.

The grocery store of the book's title is the nexus for all of this activity, a store that resists gentrification to serve the community's immigrants, laborers and more--the store suggests that there's something more valuable than chasing profit, comfort, and homogeneity--and that's living within the rich and messy complexity of a multi-racial, multicultural community. This is a profoundly American idea, one famously celebrated by Whitman in "Song of Myself", when he writes, "*Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion.*" We contain multitudes, as a collective but also as individuals. This American Idea is also a profoundly GDS idea. Seniors-as you graduate from GDS, giving you a novel about Blacks and Jews in the early 20th Century might feel a little on the nose. But like James McBride, the author of the *Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*, GDS's founders knew that not only is existing as a pluralistic and intentionally

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diverse community harder than remaining exclusively among those who share one's own stories and experiences--it's also better. The effort we make, the struggle to understand each other, the ways in which we might bump up against each other, are worth it-- our experiences are elevated and enriched and deepened by the chance to exist in a complicated, messy, diverse community and country. Almost more than anything else, seniors, I hope you take with you from GDS the ability to appreciate the humanity in those who are different from you. It's what can save us as a species. It's what will help you to solve complex problems that you encounter in your life. And it will make your life immeasurably richer, more interesting, and more meaningful.

Class of 2024, as you head off to college and beyond, I am confident that you have what you need to thrive. And I know that I speak for all of the adults at GDS when I say that we're deeply grateful that you are in the world and that we've been able to be a part of your stories. We love you. We believe in you. And we are very, very proud of you.

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