



High School Graduation

June 8, 2025

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon everyone. Welcome! Welcome to the 54th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2025. What a privilege it is to share this day with these incredible young people—to celebrate their passion, their insight, their courage, their humor, their purpose and possibility.

So, 14 years ago, I lost my wallet. I did what you do when you lose your wallet—I tore the house apart-opening cabinets and silverware drawers, checking under the seats in my car, going through the pockets of every pair of pants I remembered wearing. I called up restaurants I'd been to to see if anything had been turned in. After 3 days of this, I conceded defeat and cancelled my credit cards. I was at the final stage of the grieving process, making an appointment at the DMV to get a new license, when I had an idea.

That night at dinner I said to my kids: "If anyone finds my wallet, I'll give them 20 dollars." My two older kids took off instantly, diving under couch cushions and into the freezer. But my youngest, Natalia, who graduates today but was in the GDS PK at the time, sat still. She thought for about 15 seconds—which, for a 4-year-old, is basically forever—and then she bolted upstairs.

She came back holding my wallet.

"Nati!" I said, "You found it! Where was it?"

"In my room," she replied.

"In your room? Why was it in your room?"

"I hid it," she said.

"Didn't you know I was looking for it?"

"I forgot," she said. And then, without missing a beat, "Do I still get the \$20?"

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Apparently, Natalia and her friend Alexa Gillespie—also graduating today—had been playing a game that involved hiding their parents' wallets. The good news for David is that Alexa forgot the idea by the time she got home.

Natalia and Alexa are two of the eleven seniors graduating today whose parents work at GDS—8% of your remarkable class of 130. These students represent a combined 123 years as GDS students, and their parents represent 181 years of service to our school. Being what we call a "staff kid" offers unique insight into a school. You grow up here—running across fields during in-service days, waiting forever for faculty meetings to end, sometimes operating in a state of semi-feral independence. You know the shortcuts and where the snacks are kept. Sometimes you even get into mischief together.

But all of you—each of our graduating seniors—share something remarkable. On Wednesday at your Senior Breakfast, Emily Livelli talked about your class. Sometimes in her role as Director of College Counseling, Emily sees the worst of human nature—jealousy, second-guessing, competition. Your class was different. You were genuinely happy for each other's good news and consoled each other through disappointments. You demonstrated a kindness and generosity of spirit that is rare.

I saw this when over a hundred of you showed up at my house for breakfast after Senior Sunrise. You filled every corner of our living room and patio, ate waffles and cereal, and then...you said thank you. You helped clean up. You looked out for one another. I'm proud of your class for many reasons, but most of all for your humanity.

And now you're heading into a world that is broken in many ways, that can seem to be moving in the wrong direction. Our world needs your kindness, your intellect, your creativity, your problem-solving. But it also needs your willingness to get into what Congressman John Lewis called "good trouble."

Lewis—a civil rights icon who visited GDS more than once—believed that when the status quo is unjust, we are called to act. That was the spirit in which GDS was founded: not to go along quietly, but to disrupt what needed disrupting. Our founders believed the world could be better—and that schools could help make it so.

Now let me be clear: I am not advising you to go home and hide your parents' wallets. I AM urging you to take risks for the right reasons. Speak up. Step in. Stir things up when something feels wrong. Push the people around you to do better—and be willing to do better yourself.

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What might this look like? It might mean showing kindness to a roommate next fall who is struggling to make connections. Volunteering for a local campaign. Writing a letter to the editor. Joining a grassroots activism group on your college campus. GDS has prepared you to do all of these things. And small acts of courage ripple outward.

I hope you'll each take with you from GDS that willingness to get into "good trouble." And what else will you be taking? Several weeks ago, I asked you this question, and received many beautiful responses, far more than I can share today. You wrote about your appreciation for your teachers; your ability to advocate for things you believe in; your confidence to take risks and learn from mistakes; your deep appreciation for the GDS community and the friendships you formed.

Norah Sachse wrote: My mom recently told me that she hopes to return as a GDS senior in another life, and I couldn't agree more—except it's the life I'm already living, which makes me feel extremely lucky. Not all schools have a senior corner, guest list-less parties, a grade-wide group chat, or consistently over-the-top promposals. Students were joyous yet mostly unphased watching Peter propose to Grace by covering *an entire car* in sticky notes.

Cookie Schrag wrote: I came to GDS at a delicate time in my life. I'd spent a year and a half interacting solely through a computer screen while the world went to chaos around me. I was also 14, which doesn't help anybody. I was struggling with a lot of things, including my sense of self; I didn't know who I was, didn't much like what little I knew of myself, and had no idea what to do about it. GDS changed that, with my friends, teachers, and classmates as the catalysts. I've learned to work with myself instead of against.

Sophia Ades wrote: GDS has left its mark on me in every possible way—from denting my car in the garage, to those people I waved at everyday in the halls. This year I cried when reciting a poem for English class. I couldn't remember the words because I was getting them mixed up with my lines from theater. My teacher listened to me and silently, her eyes told me that it was OK to feel; I realized you can empathize without having to say anything at all.

Emerson Hardwick wrote: The realization that so many kids have known GDS and so many more in the future will too has hit me in waves. I feel tiny and insignificant under the weight of all that history. And yet, today I am on top of all of the weight, the most recent and present layer of history. Coming from a small Catholic school, GDS was the place I needed to go to deepen my understanding of the world around me and begin to find my place.

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Sam Pastreich wrote: My dad recently told me that the best way to measure your child's success is through the friends that surround them. At GDS, I have not had the chance to make bad friends.

Eliana Green wrote: This fall, at the annual cross country retreat, I gave a speech to my teammates about our team slogan, “run good”. “Run good” isn’t just messing with grammatical conventions to be silly; it symbolizes how we run with “goodness” in our hearts—deeply felt care and compassion for every member of the team, from the slowest runner to the school-record breaker to everyone in between. I have many memories of times I was feeling awful during a race and doubting myself, wanting to slow down or stop, and then seeing one or a group of my teammates at the crest of a hill, cheering for me as I ran by. I will take from GDS the confidence to do hard things and the knowledge that supportive people are magic.

And Sowmya Natarajan wrote: I’ll take with me a deep understanding of the power of community -- the kind that sees you for who you are, challenges you to grow, and invites you to share your gifts with others. In sixth grade --I felt caught between different groups, unsure of how to show up as my full self. I wasn’t yet confident enough to share my culture, my passions, or even my voice in class discussions and so in seventh grade, I decided to leave GDS. Being away helped me realize what I had taken for granted-- the relationships I had built, the teachers who saw me, and the small moments that shaped me in ways I didn’t fully appreciate until I was gone. Coming back to GDS in ninth grade felt like returning home. I have learned to take up space, to share my voice, and to create room for others to do the same. I’ll take that with me into the world -- an understanding that belonging is not just something we find, but something we build together.

Class of 2025, your reflections remind me why this school exists—to put people with different stories in conversation with each other, to create communities where everyone belongs.

And to the families gathered here today: thank you. Thank you for entrusting us with these remarkable young people. Thank you for partnering with us in their growth. Today we celebrate not just their achievements, but the love and support that made those achievements possible.

Seniors, as you prepare to leave GDS, my wish for you is this: Keep an open mind. Remember what it feels like to be part of a community that sees you and values you. Find new communities that do the same—and help build them. Remain kind. Cause good trouble. And never forget that there are people back on Davenport Street who love you and are very, very proud of you.

Congratulations, Class of 2025.

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