



High School Graduation
June 7, 2026
Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome—welcome to the 55th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School, and to the graduation of the Class of 2026.

The beating heart of our High School is something called the Forum. It's an indoor amphitheater, which is the first thing you see when you walk into the school, and it functions as part living room, part dining hall, part town square. Within the Forum, the seniors have a place that is theirs: the senior corner. I have watched this class inhabit that corner for the past year—playing cards, listening to music, doing homework. Arguing about things that matter and things that absolutely do not. In the Senior Corner, they have celebrated each other's victories, consoled each other through disappointments, and sometimes laughed loudly enough that a teacher in a classroom fifty yards away would close their door.

Every year at GDS, almost the moment the seniors leave campus at the end of April to go on their Senior Quests, something happens. The juniors move in.

It happened a few weeks ago—before some of you had fully cleared out your things, the Class of 2027 had already started taking over the senior corner.

I don't say this as criticism. I mean, you did it too. I say it because I find it kind of beautiful. There is something deeply human about that reaching toward what's next. The leaning into the future before the present is fully finished.

Seniors, you have been leaning forward your whole lives. And today, you get to go.

But before you do, I want to give you one last word problem. Are you ready?

You are walking from Washington, DC, to Los Angeles, which is roughly 2,700 miles. You set off heading west, but you are three degrees off course.

Where do you end up? (I'm so tempted to call on one of you, but I'm not going to. We have a graduation to attend to).

If you're off by three degrees to the south, you end up in the ocean off the coast of Mexico.

Three degrees to the north and you'll find yourself somewhere near Bakersfield.

Just three degrees. Sitting here today, at the beginning of a journey that feels like almost nothing. But over a long enough distance, it becomes the difference between where you intended to go and somewhere else entirely.

I'm not here today to tell you that your job is to be perfect, that you need to get everything exactly right. I *do* want to make sure, however, that as you head out on this journey, you have a good compass.

Because over the course of your life, the direction you are pointed—the values you return to, the questions you keep asking—matters more than how fast you move.

My hope is that GDS has helped you to set your compass. Not by telling you what to think, but by surrounding you with people who challenged you to think more deeply. By giving you freedom and trusting you with it. By teaching you how to sit with really hard questions. And by helping you discover not just what you are good at, but also what you care about.

This spring, I asked you what you would be taking with you from GDS, and one thing came through again and again in your responses.

It wasn't prestige or accomplishments or college admissions. It was Community. Now, you didn't always use the word community, a word that sometimes is spoken with air quotes in high schools. But it's what you were talking about.

Julian Lucas said: "Walking down the hallway in the high school, it doesn't really feel like school. It feels like a social gathering where I also have classes."

Nico Abbate said: "When you go into the library at GDS, you can sit at any table."

And **Sophie Gresens** said: "GDS provided me with the ability to stay true to myself while engaging with people whose lives and perspectives are very different from my own."

Over and over, you described a school thick with relationships, where teachers become mentors, and where students are allowed, and even encouraged, to become intensely interested in strange and specific things.

You told me about the Integration Bee, FATA Morgana, Quiz Bowl, weird assemblies, cross-country practices, pickleball tournaments, petting zoos, clubs with names that sound made up. (Oh Darn, It's Yarn? Cheese Club?)

One of you wrote: "We should become even weirder." I completely agree. Because at our best, GDS is a place that gives people permission to become more fully themselves. The world has enough people trying to seem impressive. It needs more people who are genuinely alive, who care about ideas and humans and justice.

Noah Kolker told me about first arriving at GDS for high school and hearing another student say: "I'm so excited for math class," and being shocked that someone would speak those words out loud.

But that's actually one of the defining characteristics of this place. People care here. They care about theater and stoichiometry and robotics and poetry and volleyball and ethics bowl and Spanish literature and student government and jazz band and climbing club and environmental science and spoken word and calculus proofs.

And because people care here, in such public, visible ways, it gives everyone else permission to care too. That's rare. Hold onto that.

Many of you told me not just about classes, but about adults who saw something in you before you fully saw it in yourself. You spoke about teachers who stayed after class, coaches who checked in when you were struggling, advisors who remembered things you told them years ago, adults who pushed you hard because they believed you were capable of more.

Tatum Mach said of a teacher: "He always made it clear to me that he saw something great in me. It made me feel like I could be great." One of the most powerful things a school can do is help people see themselves more clearly, not as finished products, but as people still becoming.

Kihika Hyera said: "Being given trust, freedom, and privilege means you also have responsibility to uphold that trust." GDS has always believed in giving students unusual amounts of freedom and independence. Sometimes you use that freedom brilliantly. Sometimes less

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brilliantly. But what's important is that we trusted you enough to practice becoming adults while you were still in high school.

You learned how to advocate for yourselves. How to manage your time. How to recover from setbacks. How to navigate relationships. How to speak up when something mattered to you. And perhaps most importantly, how to take intellectual risks. You learned that hard things are hard, but that they are worth doing.

One of you wrote to me: "The worst thing ever would be to have an easy life."

And this class, for all its joy and warmth and weirdness, also worked incredibly hard. You pursued difficult questions and stretched yourselves toward things that mattered. I hope you continue to do that, not because suffering is noble, but because often the most meaningful parts of life require effort, courage, and persistence.

When I think about the undertakings that have been most important to me during my time here, they've required two things working together: the work of the hands and the work of the heart.

The work of the hands involves things like competence, preparation, follow-through, learning your craft. When you work through a fourth draft of an essay, or run extra wind sprints after practice, or rehearse the piece one more time--that's the work of the hands. You each know how to do hard things now, and that's going to matter in your lives.

But the work of the hands is not enough. You also need the heart.

The work of the heart is showing up for your Lower School buddy, it's making your teammate who rides the bench feel just as important as the starter. It's asking not just, "What do I need to do to succeed?" but "Why am I doing this and who does it serve?"

In my experience, the most meaningful work in life happens when your heart and hands align. When your intelligence and effort is directed towards something you genuinely care about, something that matters.

I have seen that combination in this class. I saw it in the way you showed up for each other during the college process, on the running teams, theater productions, affinity groups, and *Augur Bit*. I saw it in the way so many of you describe your peers—not competitively, but affectionately.

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Anjali Martin-Shanker said: “There’s something about GDS that makes you feel connected and like you belong.”

Those feelings—connection and belonging—are fragile. Try to build and protect them wherever you go next. The world often encourages performance and resumes over authenticity. Resist that. Stay interested in human relationships.

Every spring, I gather with my three closest college friends in Big Sur, California. We hike, eat long meals, argue about books and politics and parenting, and play intensely competitive Scrabble. We first met when we were your age, and this year, standing on a bluff above the Pacific, we realized that it has been nearly forty years since we met. And what struck me was not how successful my friends had become, but how distinctly themselves they each still were.

Over time, life has challenged and humbled each of us, but underneath it all, you can still see the eighteen-year-olds we once were. That’s what I hope for you. Not that you stay unchanged, but that you remain connected to the deepest parts of yourselves. The parts that are curious, generous, funny, earnest, passionate. The parts that make you *you*.

Seniors, after a lot of thought, I’ve realized that GDS without the Class of 2026 is no longer a place worth inhabiting, so I’ve decided to leave with you.

For sixteen years, being Head of GDS has not simply been something I did. It has been something I was. So now for me comes the strange and necessary work of letting go. But one of the things life teaches us is that loving something deeply does not mean holding onto it forever. I leave this role profoundly grateful. Grateful for colleagues who have chosen to dedicate their lives to young people. Grateful for families who entrusted us with what mattered most to them. And grateful most of all for all of you, young people who fill our hallways with energy and laughter and possibility.

When I asked what you would be taking from GDS, Sosi Audain answered this way: “I learned how to be a new day.”

I have been thinking about that sentence, because in many ways, that is what graduation is. Not an ending, but a new day. A beginning.

And so I want to end by returning one last time to the word problem.

Three degrees. Over a long enough distance, three degrees changes everything.

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But here is what I should have told you at the start: The destination isn't the point. We think it is—where we go to college, our first job, our list of achievements—that's not the point. Your life isn't going to go in a straight line, nor should it. A meaningful life is built by paying attention to your compass. By asking: What do I care about? What kind of life feels worthy and alive and true? How might I be of use?

And then having the courage to move in that direction, even when everyone around you seems headed somewhere else. Trust your compass.

Take care of each other, seniors. Keep your weirdness. Keep your joy. Keep your curiosity. And when you find yourself somewhere unexpected someday—and you will—don't assume you are lost. Pause. Look at your compass. See where it's pointing. And keep going.

Class of 2026: We love you. We believe in you. And we are so incredibly proud of you.

Seniors...You may move your tassels from the right to the left, transitioning you from GDS students to GDS alumni.

And now, GDS community: I present to you the Georgetown Day School Class of 2026!

(Throw Caps)

I'd like to take this last opportunity to say, on behalf of the faculty, staff, and administration of Georgetown Day School, a final **congratulations** to our graduates.

And now, Class of 2026, I want to invite you to be present. Look out at this extended community of teachers, parents, friends and more—all of whom believe in your tremendous capacity and are extraordinarily proud of you.

My closing tradition is to read a poem by Mary Oliver called "The Summer Day".

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The Summer Day

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

Class of 2026, may you encounter joy, growth, and blessing in your one wild and precious life. You have our confidence, our support, our love, and our profound hope for the road ahead.

Congratulations!

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