

USCHS Commencement Speeches (in their entirety)

June 11, 2015

Opening Remarks—Frank J. Kerber, President, Upper St. Clair Board of School Directors

Members of the Class of 2015, on behalf of the Board of School Directors of the Upper St. Clair School District, I extend to each of you our warmest congratulations and best wishes upon your graduation. This is truly a night for you to celebrate! This ceremony is the culmination of your efforts—your accomplishments in academics, in sports, in the arts, in service activities, and in your personal growth—from youth to young adults. Your diploma is recognition that we certify that you have acquired the necessary skills to proceed on to the next stage of your life, whether that is higher education, the military, or the workplace. Those who have supported you in this process—your family, your teachers, your friends—share in your happiness this evening.

It was just five short years ago that I sat on this platform to watch my own son's high school graduation. Last year he graduated from a university. It was 45 years ago that my wife graduated from Upper St. Clair High School. Our family's history is entwined with this District and we are thankful for the educational experience and preparation that this school provides.

For myself, just a couple weeks ago I traveled to Cincinnati to participate in my 50th high school reunion. It was a fun event, providing the opportunity to speak with many classmates whom I had not seen for 50 years. It was also a time to reflect on the 30 classmates who had passed away since my graduation day. That experience caused me to reflect on the significance of high school graduations.

The adults seated in this stadium—your family and friends, your teachers, and those of us on this platform—look at you in your caps and gowns, and have a mixture of feelings. Of course, we share your happiness and excitement on this occasion. We are proud of you and what you have accomplished. We are filled with hope as you leave this ceremony and begin the next stage of your life. But we are also filled with vicarious anticipation.

We see in each of you the potential for success. You force us to think back on our own life experiences and how we have lived and how we have spent the time and resources given to each of us. Each of you holds the future in your hands. You are living vessels of opportunity and progress. The world beyond Upper St. Clair High School will be affected by your work, your curiosity, your friendships, and your vision.

Don't be afraid of rejection. The world is yours to claim; not because of the diploma in your hands, but because we have each other and our lives are intertwined. Success is about using your skills and talents to do something bigger in this world for all of us. Sometimes our journeys are uncertain, but every step brings us closer to understanding why we are here. If things don't go as expected, make the unexpected work in your favor.

Yes, the adults in this stadium are gazing at you with vicarious anticipation because you are at the next stage of your life's journey. Your future is a clean slate waiting to be filled. The world is waiting to see what you will do.

Superintendent's Address—Dr. Patrick T. O'Toole, USC Superintendent of Schools

I would like to start my remarks by letting the Class of 2015 know just how wonderful it feels to share this special day with you. Thank you so much for all that you have done to maintain and elevate the rich tradition of educational excellence at Upper St. Clair High School.

This is my ninth opportunity to address a USC graduating class, and I ask our graduates to view my remarks as your final five minutes of instruction. Tonight, I will talk with you briefly about how your uniqueness and special talents fit into an often times standardized world. You know this standardized world by now. Recently you have been exposed to it through the requirements of final exams, AP and IB tests, and college admission requirements.

I started thinking about this topic while talking to some of your parents and teachers, who pointed out the distinct differences in all of you. In fact, we have yet to find two students exactly alike at USC; even siblings are much different from their brothers and sisters.

Ever since you arrived at USC, which for most of you was August 2002, you brought with you your own special gifts and talents. Not the "every kid gets a trophy" definition of special, but your own special interests, personalities, inclinations, learning styles, and more.

At school, your uniqueness was introduced to what we call requirements and standards. In fact, you are on the verge of receiving a diploma based on graduation requirements and standards. The word “standards” connotes sameness, likeness, uniformity, and benchmarks. In fact, you are dressed in robes that signify you are one uniform group—the USC Class of 2015.

Take note of politicians who speak about education. They almost always promote high standards and common curriculum for all students. I often think, wouldn’t it be refreshing if just one politician stood up and said this about education: “Standards are important, but we must foremost recognize that all students are unique, and all possess special gifts and talents.”

But this idea of uniqueness in education is not new. Learning theorists as far back as the 1800s, when Friedrich Froebel created the concept of kindergarten, reinforced the notion of uniqueness. Froebel found that each student has his or her own specific needs and capabilities for learning, and schools should nurture this uniqueness.

I feel fortunate to lead a school district with a mission that challenges our staff to nurture the uniqueness of each child.

This dichotomy, this “give-and-take” if you will, between the competing notions of your uniqueness vs. standards may play out in the following scenario in the coming weeks:

Tonight your parents may put their arms around you and tell you how special you are. Then, a few weeks from now, you may begin a pattern of not coming home until late at night (or early in the morning) and your help around the house may become lax. At that point, your parents may use a different tone to remind you that you aren’t so special after all, and you must follow the rules of the house!

Uniqueness and special talent are not just the province of great athletes, musicians, business leaders, and famous people. Each of you possesses attributes, strengths, and perspectives that set you apart. Moreover, your individual strengths are needed to enhance the teamwork and the productivity of larger groups, including your families, workplace, communities, and our nation.

There is no absolute formula or metric to determine when it is best to display your individual uniqueness and special talents or when it is best to play by the rules, fit in, and work toward a collective standard. It will require self-reflection, analysis, mentors, teachers, a supportive family, and true friends. Most of all, it will take your wisdom, and sometimes it will take your courage, to determine your best direction.

Based on your record of achievements and accomplishments at Upper St. Clair, I am certain that you will have the wisdom and the courage needed to know which path to take. Moreover, you will understand how to blend your unique and special talents with the requirements of a standardized world.

Commencement Speech—Meredith McDonough, USCHS Class of 2015

I’m standing here addressing
Three-hundred forty-three
Of my good friends and my classmates:
High school graduates to-be.

When, at first, I went to write
I was a bit confused.
How does one write such a speech?
What should one include?

I wrote a dewy-eyed first draft,
Through-and-through cliché
I laughed at all the platitudes
And threw the thing away.

Take the “road less travelled by,”
“New chapter of your life”
Are too oft-spoken for this speech
Too common and too rife.

I wrote a second version,
An improvement to be sure
But one more MLK quote,
And even I would snore.

While we “have a dream,”
And it’s “time to do what’s right,”
I didn’t want to parrot—
That’s too tired and too trite.

So now I know what not to do,
I’m skipping the banal—
But let me start by saying
Congratulations one and all.

We’ve worked quite hard these last four years
To finally reach this day.
But I’ve heard a troubling notion
That I’ll now try to allay.

A brazen few have boldly asked,
Words cutting like knives:
“When will we use this high school stuff
in our real lives?”

It’s foolish to pretend that
The world’s the same as school.
And while you’ve learned a lot here,
It’s not all a useful tool.

Shakespeare is incredible,
But when you’re thirty-three
And proposing to your girlfriend
Don’t say “to be or not to be.”

And when you’re searching for a job
And you’re comparing pays,
Geometry won’t help you much
So forget the lines and rays.

But don’t misunderstand me
If there’s one thing I’ve been shown:
This high school education is
The most precious thing we own.

For one, there’s joy in learning
In and of itself.
Exploring life’s great questions,
Finding answers for yourself.

While our futures aren’t all full of
Trigonometry and tests,
All that we have learned here
Will help us be our best.

Through all we’ve done at USC
We’re prepped for what’s ahead
Not because the world’s like high school
But because we’re skilled, instead.

We’ve learned the value of hard work
And that of time well spent,
We’ve learned to think quick on our feet:
How to fake it—I mean, invent.

These talents forged for weeks, months, years
Inside these concrete walls
Will serve us brilliantly in life

Regardless of our calls.

The next four years will not look like
The four that came before
But because of what we've done here,
We can now do so much more.

So I know I said I wouldn't quote,
But Twain's spot-on this time.
"History doesn't repeat itself
But it certainly does rhyme."

Commencement Speech—Brian Tsui, USCHS Class of 2015

I have a confession to make: my high school experience wasn't what my middle-school-self had in mind. There was never the dramatic teen angst of a Lindsay Lohan movie, or the crazy antics of a Drake and Josh episode. And for another thing, my classmates certainly did not look like their *High School Musical* counterparts.

Looking out the back seat window when driving past on Washington Road all those years and seeing that large, imposing, brick castle they called the high school looming over the whole town always had me in awe. What would I do here? Would it be meaningful? Would I be remembered?

I don't know if I'll ever know the answer to those questions, or even if I'll be remembered a year, or even months from now by this school, but I am satisfied that the past four years have allowed me to find love. No, not *that* kind of love. But rather, my love for literature. My love for our past. My love for friends and family, and what I credit Upper St. Clair most for—my love for the written word.

In freshman year our teachers taught us how to write essays. In sophomore year how to write better essays. In junior year how to write research papers. And in senior year, poetry, and the art of writing soul-searching college essays. From Atticus's guiding words to Scout and Jem to Hamlet's suicidal soliloquy, this school has allowed words to have such an impact upon me that I came, in turn, to love reciprocating its impact — so much so that I spent the better part of a few nights in front of a blank word document thinking about what to say right now.

It's beautiful to see how everything at Upper St Clair has been so intricately built to set a foundation for our development. And although I used the English department as an example, this foundation, or Banyan tree as Mr. Shefler says, applies to every department in this school, and all the sports, clubs, and activities into which our teacher-sponsors-coaches so dutifully poured their time and hearts. It is a foundation for what our teachers truly wanted for *us*, our success. Walking the halls of this castle for the past four years, our fingers outstretched on both sides, we lived inside success. Every teacher strove to give all of us the opportunity to find our own loves, whether it be the philosophical implications of the human condition from Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* or the derivation of the next great aeronautic feat that could let us touch the face of heaven once more.

Mr. Durkin once said that after spending so much of their time and dedication in planting and nurturing the seeds of our success, teachers will never see the tall, confident, trees we grow into—and they're okay with that. They were our mentors, our guides, our friends—who took our hands and painted the world a different color for us, who, in the words of Arne Duncan, "taught us to solve problems like a scientist, write like a poet, see like an artist, and observe like a journalist". Teachers may not see or remember the extent of their influence on each of the 343 seeds planted here today, but we will forever remember them.

Yet this foundation of success goes beyond the classroom. Our teachers may have been our friends, but our friends were our second family. We all founded our own micro-cultures, our tight band of weary adventurers who traversed together into the dark recesses of our sanity until the wee hours of twilight straining our eyes and fingers for that chem project for Mrs. Marks or that research paper for Mr. Durkin. And although the light at the end of this long, dark tunnel is finally here, it also means our adventure is concluding.

So while we all may be parting with each other very soon and moving on to the next adventure of our lives, I'd like to offer a few words from Gwen Stacy of the *Amazing Spiderman*: "I know it feels like we're saying goodbye, but we will carry a piece of each other into everything we do next... To remind us of who we are... and who we were meant to be."

And although some of us may have never been in a food fight, shoved in a locker, or gone to a crazy house party like Cady Heron's, our collective past four years have been more than that. Looking out from inside the high school and towards Washington Road, I can definitively say everything that we've done at this school has been meaningful to each *other*, and to ourselves. And that's enough—for while we may be leaving Upper St. Clair today, Upper St. Clair will never leave us.

Commencement Speech—Brooks Wilding, USCHS Class of 2015

Ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you today as a proud member of the graduating class of 2015. Our class's accomplishments seem innumerable, and our talents are evident in the destinations where many of us will continue our academic careers. This fall, my fellow classmates will attend college at prestigious schools such as Cornell, Cal Berkeley, and U Chicago, just to name a few. But how did we get to this point? Isaac Newton once said, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." So today, I would like to dedicate this speech to the metaphorical giants who have served as the support system behind each of our high school careers: our parents, our coaches and our teachers.

We certainly have an athletically gifted senior class leaving the high school this year. But make no mistake; these skills have been refined through years of dedication from the people in life who love us most. Athletic accomplishment is familiar to our class; my peers have been a part of two state champion soccer teams and a state champion golf team. We also have numerous individual WPIAL and state champions on the swim team. And the newest addition to our trophy case: our 2015 WPIAL champion boys' tennis team. Yet, these accomplishments could not have been reached without the assistance of our parents. Long before high school sports, our parents were the ones who traveled with us to the fields, pools, or gyms for competitions all over the state, country, and possibly even the world. For every hour we put in at practice, our parents devoted equal time plus the driving time both ways. For those of us fortunate enough to have had our mom or dad coach our team, it was immediately obvious how invested they were in our success, happiness, and effort on the field. It was not always easy to express our gratitude when we were "forced to go to practice" or had to miss going to a Steelers game in the fall for a travel baseball game. Nonetheless, the principles of sacrifice and hard work have been cemented into our personalities thanks to our parents' constant love and motivation. But there is more to the story. At the high school level, we have some of the most talented coaches in the WPIAL, all of whom are committed to their athletes' success. Personally, I've had no better mentors in both wrestling and life than the three men I had the honor of calling "coach" this wrestling season: Mr. Sean O'Rourke, Mr. Ryan Logue, and Dr. Dominic Frollini. General Douglas MacArthur once said, "Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that, upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory." All of our coaches put in countless hours to make us the athletes and people we are today, and because of them we shall certainly "bear the fruits of victory" in years to come.

And then there's the academic side of things. We have all been blessed with the greatest teaching staff in the state. Thinking about the excellence of our educators, I go back to a conversation I had with my econ teacher about a month ago. When I commented that he was likely my best teacher this year, he humbly scoffed at my remark. Upon his inquiry as to his competition for this title, I explained, "Well I suppose you're tied with my math teacher because he knows something about virtually everything." However, I realized that in considering my teachers' incredible ability, my other math teacher, for statistics, was especially skilled in motivating students to strive for success. And while math and science classes are certainly within my comfort zone, perhaps my best teacher was any one of my English teachers, all of whom gave me a greater appreciation for literature, especially in poetry this year. Or maybe my best educator came from physics class, or Spanish class, or calc class, or any of the more than 20 classes I have had the pleasure of taking. The point was clear in my mind: I couldn't single out any one person as my best teacher. What a great first-world problem to have!

Of course, this is our day. And I could easily stand up here and extol the honors bestowed upon our class. However, the learning, the creativity, and the inspiration that propels students toward their goals stems decidedly from the incredible men and women we have the honor of calling our teachers. Yet, on graduation day, we, not these people, typically receive all the applause. Please join me in giving these men and women the thanks they deserve.

As teenagers, we face many difficulties in expressing our gratitude to the people who deserve it the most. It is not easy to express your gratitude to your history teacher when he assigns you a 20-page research paper or your English teacher when she requires your complete memorization of a Shakespearean

soliloquy. It is not easy to say thank you to your coach when he pushes you to run one more sprint, do one more rep, or swim one more lap. It is tough to feel grateful when your mom or dad nags you to study for the SAT or encourages you to join an after-school club. Yet none of these people who motivate us every day are acting out of self-interest. It is easy to get caught up in our own ideas of what is best for us. We teenage know-it-alls struggle to appreciate the people who most want to see us succeed. Therefore, on behalf of the class of 2015, I'd like to extend my warmest gratitude to all of our teachers, coaches, and parents for ignoring our teenage stubbornness and showing persistence in your shaping and transforming us into the young adults we are meant to be, and ultimately, the grown-ups we aspire to become.