

2016 Upper St. Clair High School Commencement Speeches

Buffy Hasco

President, Upper St. Clair Board of School Directors

Standing before you today, I can honestly say that I'm more painfully aware than ever of how little I know. With age comes hubris. Giving a commencement speech is pretty daunting. So I established one parameter for myself: be brief. If nothing else, you will think of me fondly when you're munching on buffalo chicken dip and cheering as the Pens score their first goal of the night.

Class of 2016, you are a remarkable group. Your academic, artistic, and athletic accomplishments have been significant. You are a dream team, matriculating to schools that have every kindergarten parent in Upper St. Clair patting themselves on the back for choosing our School District. Well done! And I congratulate your parents and teachers, who surely share in your success. As for the schools, I won't even attempt to list them; first, because it would violate my brevity rule and second, because I've seen how that plays out. The speaker always leaves out a few great ones and invariably offends a few people. I'm not even going to mention my own alma mater, though many consider it to be the Harvard of State College.

Some of you didn't have perfect SATs or a 5.0 grade point average. One of the most valuable skills in life is the ability to work hard and persist, even when you don't always excel. I'm speaking to the average students, the benchwarmers, and the chorus. If you can experience the pure joy of doing something you love without needing the validation of being the best, I'm betting you're going to be a pretty happy person. Very few of us are the best at something. I'm not. My kids give me a card every year that says, "You're the best mother," but, honestly, I suspect it's just because Hallmark doesn't sell one that says, "You are a perfectly adequate mother" or "You're fine." And know this: the high school experience is not always predictive of future success. Not all skills can be precisely tested, evaluated, measured, and standardized. The capacity for collaboration is one example. No matter how bright you are, if you don't play well with others, it's going to be tricky. If you alienate your team, you're going to have to cure cancer alone. I don't have the faintest idea what would be involved in curing cancer, but I suspect it would be really hard to do by yourself.

Life can be difficult. Many of you know this already. Having navigated the social and academic trials of high school, I imagine you all have your battle scars. The best advice I have for shoring up your reserves for the storms and possible tsunamis in your path ahead is to find your people, your squad, your tribe. Friends who really know you—not the insta, snap chatting, I'm having an awesome time, all the time, you—but the real you. Find a kindred spirit who has your back no matter what—whether you experience the heights of success or the depths of despair. It doesn't have to be a crowd; one or two will do. But trust me on this—you will need them. Surround yourself with people who make you better; who make you feel less alone, less scared; who hold the ladder as you climb the rungs, keeping it steady so you don't fall. Share your heart with people, even if it's been broken. Use social media carefully, and never as a weapon. Be kind.

So, Class of 2016, I leave you with this: whether you had the ideal high school experience or if it was something less than that, know that these four years are just a snapshot, a moment in time, one chapter. You have all the time, space, energy, and opportunity to write your story. You each have something meaningful to say. Discover your voice and trust it. And always know that this is your home, even if you're running away from it as fast as you can. We will be here, in your corner, cheering you on and waiting, with bated breath, to see the magic you create.

Dr. Patrick O'Toole

Superintendent, Upper St. Clair School District

This is my tenth opportunity to address an Upper St. Clair High School graduating class. Tonight, I will talk with you briefly about two of your constant companions: your inner voice and your inner critic. Increasingly, these two companions seem to show up like The Cat and the Hat and his friends, Thing One and Thing Two—sometimes wreaking havoc, and sometimes cleaning things up.

As a friendly companion, this inner voice has helped you make good decisions, keeping you safe as you grew from childhood, through adolescence, and to the young adults you are today. In fact, your parents have counted on this inner voice to keep you safe when they were not around, hoping your inner voice sounded a lot like their voice. Researcher J.D. Krumboltz found that this inner voice will influence your career decisions. He labels this voice a "self-observation generalization" that informs you that you have the skills, the interest, and the inclination it takes to be an accountant, doctor, teacher, nurse, entrepreneur, or whatever career you choose.

But Krumboltz cautions that this voice, this self-observation, can also be an inhibitor to your decision-making. It may limit your choices and potential for fear of stepping outside of your self-observation or because you may be making an inaccurate self-observation.

Author and researcher Tara Mohr calls the limiting version of your inner voice, your inner critic. Mohr suggests that there may be several forms of fear at the core of your inner critic, whether it be fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of controversy, self-doubt, or even fear of being alone.

Mohr suggests several tools to help us manage the influence of our inner critic. I will focus on one. She suggests that we learn to “unhook from criticism and praise.” In case you didn’t realize it these past 13 years, the school setting tends to provide plenty of criticism and praise toward all of us.

Fear of criticism, Mohr posits, may hold you back at times. Therefore, it will be important for you to recognize and manage this fear.

On the flip side of criticism, many of you may have grown accustomed to receiving praise. An unhealthy reliance on praise, according to Mohr, may prevent you from stretching in new directions, moving lateral at times instead of up, or attempting innovation or experiencing the unknown out of fear that you will no longer be praised.

The upshot is that your friendly inner voice may help you by warning you of risks, while your inner critic may hold you back out of fear of risks. But do not let fear imprison you to your comfort zone. As the Dalai Lama once said, “Take into account that great love and great achievements involve risk.”

My final suggestion to you is to allow your inner critic to be present, but have a conversation with it. In that dialog, tell your inner critic that as a graduate of Upper St. Clair High School, you are prepared for risks, uncertainty, and new experiences as a student, an employee, a family member, and a citizen of our great country.

Michael Nastac

USCHS Class of 2016

Where do we come from? What are our roots? Today, here at graduation, we stand on the shoulders of giants. The teachers who encouraged us to inquire further, the parents who put up with and calmed our teenage stubbornness and angst, the mentors and coaches who pushed us beyond what we thought our limits were.

Yet, in addition to the giants in our personal lives, we stand on the shoulders of the great innovators of our time.

In September 1997, around the time when many of us were born, the Google search engine went online for the first time. Today, we can “google” whatever our hearts desire and get billions of related web results in less than a second. Before Google and other Internet search engines, if we ever wanted to know something, we would have had to go to the library and hopefully find a book related closely enough to what we wanted to know. We now have the entirety of human knowledge at our fingertips, and it is only in these past 18 years that this has become a reality.

In April 2003, when we were in kindergarten and those at Baker were singing “Puff, the Magic Dragon” with Mrs. Lacey, the Human Genome Project, which mapped out all of the genes that make up the human body, was completed after 13 years of collaborative international work. We have been able to better understand diseases and better link DNA mutations to different forms of cancer as a result, and modern medicine has never been the same since.

In June 2007, after we finished fourth grade and studied crabs and caterpillars in our classrooms, the first iPhone was released. Two years later, after climbing Mt. Davis at Deer Valley and leaving Boyce for Fort Couch, the first Samsung Galaxy came out. By the time we reached high school in 2012, our flip phones and keyboard phones were waning in favor of smartphones, which are now everywhere. With these tiny devices that fit in our pockets, we can take HD pictures, use the Internet, communicate with anyone across the globe at the speed of light, and keep track of where we are using GPS satellites in space. Our smartphones today are over a hundred million times more powerful than all of NASA’s computers in 1969 that put two men on the Moon.

The list of life-changing advances in our lifetime goes on. But the list of giants does as well, and it goes back even further in time. All the great leaders, philosophers, scientists, and thinkers in human history are part of our origins and progress today. And we also stand on the shoulders of the names of people we don’t know and will never know: the hunter-gatherers, farmers, workers, who kept our ancestral lines alive over the years of mankind.

The Earth itself and life have also changed drastically. From the changes in the composition of the atmosphere to the shifts in the planet’s tectonic plates, our planet has grown side-by-side with the development of life.

But, even more, the elements that we all know so well, from the nitrogen in our DNA to the oxygen in our lungs, we’re made from the remnants of supernovas, exploding stars. We are, as the late astronomer Carl Sagan said, “made of star stuff.” With a universe over 13 billion years old filled with billions of galaxies each with billions of stars, there is much grandeur to the cosmic shoulders on which we stand.

Clearly, we have quite the legacy to live up to. But, we are living during an exciting age, and our future seems bright. Artificial intelligence is rapidly improving. We are increasingly learning about how our brains work.

Renewable energy solutions are becoming more promising. The advancement of medicine is allowing us to live longer and healthier. The first Martian will be in our lifetime.

At the same time, we have a big responsibility. We are at a crossroads where we determine the future, where the fate of mankind rests in our hands. We as a species are in constant conflict around the globe, and we have enough weaponry to wipe out humanity. As developed as we think we have become, one in ten people still don't have access to safe and clean drinking water, and 1.3 billion people live without electricity. And global warming is perhaps the largest threat to our continued long-term survival. Last year was the warmest recorded year in history. The amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has nearly doubled in the last 50 years. The global sea level has risen about 70 millimeters since we were born. The planet isn't going anywhere, but we very well could. In the encompassing vastness of space, there is no greater vulnerability to our existence on our lonely rock than our own self-destruction. The Earth is our only home, so we must preserve it and keep it habitable for us and all life on the planet.

We have great potential in our graduating class of 2016: future engineers who designed and launched their own rockets, award-winning actors who will make strides in the fine arts; tomorrow's doctors who have shadowed at hospitals and already performed medical research, statewide and nationally recognized orators who will become future government leaders. We all have aspirations to make a positive difference in the world, and I know that we can help drive mankind forward.

Let's not forget from where we've come, and where we should be going. Rather than waste our heritage, let's shape a future worthy of continuing that legacy. Let us become giants on whose shoulders future generations can stand.

Mary Cugini ***USCHS Class of 2016***

I have lived in the same house for almost 18 years, yet my mind has not always resided there. It has roamed the minds of brilliant thinkers, from Vonnegut to Dickens, Kerouac to Dostoyevsky, my perception has travelled vastly abroad. My brain has been stretched to all corners of the world, unable to shrink back to its original size. Yet, my body has always remained in the Mac-n-Cheese colored house on top of a cul-de-sac in Upper St. Clair.

Upon entering high school, I wore low ponytails, pre-wrap headbands, and some type of hoodie and sweat pants daily. Going into senior year, I cannot see much has changed, at least on the outside. Yet, mentally I have become ages different. Let me explain...

Freshman year my identity was extremely simple to follow and to identify: basketball, breakfast sandwiches, and fitting in. My entire thought process revolved around those three things. Instead of worrying about our futures, the vast majority of us were probably more concerned about homecoming and walking on the right side of the hallway. As freshmen, I believe our gaze fell upon becoming a part of something. We all wished to become a part of an identity, the Upper St. Clair student section.

Sophomore year usually is referred to as the forgotten year in high school, but instead for me, it was the most trying. I lost my father. No, I am not sharing this statement for sympathy or condolences, but to prove a point. In high school, we all face some type of adversity. Some of us face hardships at home, school, or with friends, and sometimes the hardest battles are with ourselves. Right now, think back to your challenge, whatever it may be, then look at where you are sitting, what you are wearing. Also, think about who was there for you during that challenge, whether it was a friend, family, teacher, coach, anyone. For me, I was and am still in awe of everyone at school who stood by me; be it a teacher who never said anything to me, but always offered a smile when I couldn't, the school counselor who let me sit in her office no matter the time of day, or the student in my history class that took notes for me even though we rarely spoke. That challenge showed me that we are all a part of something bigger, something greater than anything we could be alone. And to each student here: that adversity did not hold you back, it did not stop you. You are here, we are all here as the USC student section. Congratulations... we made it!

Junior year revolved around SAT and ACT prep, taking the SAT and ACT, probably the hardest course load of our lives, and mulling over the idea of what we want to do with our lives for the next four years. In other words, junior year was a breeze. If it hadn't been for coffee, pickleball, and our pets (shout out to my dog, Blake) I don't think many of us would have made it through that year. Once again, congratulations; we made it through that, too!

And lastly senior year—a few words sum it up. Those would be emotional (thank you college applications), exhausting (thank you teachers for never easing up on us and always pushing us), and rewarding. Rewarding in every sense of the word. I believe that this year friendships have been tested and strengthened; my friends that I've become close with this year are the ones I cannot think of being without. Rewarding in the way that we graduated, we finished high school. But, most importantly, would be the relationships we built. Every struggle, every challenge, every football game, and every homecoming dance. We did it together; we, the class of 2016.

Leah Day

USCHS Class of 2016

I would like to begin with a story. When I was in eighth grade, I did not yet attend public school. At my previous school, it was tradition for each of the eighth grade graduates to give a short speech at graduation. I would like to repeat to you now the sentiment that I began with during that speech: “When this is over, there will only be after. There will never again be before or during.”

After this ceremony, our time at Upper St. Clair high school is officially over. We will never be able to return to the experience and state of mind of existing before or during high school. Throughout our lives we will never be able to return to our previous selves; we must press forward.

I’d like to continue with a somber note. I think that on such an important day as today, perspective is important, and while statistics are sometimes difficult to wrap our minds around, they lend us a new perspective. According to the World Food Programme, there are 795 million people in the world who do not have the food to live a healthy lifestyle. That’s one in every nine people on earth. Also, according to the United Nations, 60 million primary school-aged children are not in school. And somewhere in America is a high school with five cafeteria lines. Somewhere in America is a 350-student-strong senior class. A class that complains about having to take gym, about their classes, about finals, about SATs. But, hey, we’re only human. My point isn’t to make you feel bad about yourself or insignificant. My point is this: We, the class of 2016, have been given a bright future in a world where there is so much darkness. I say that we have been given a bright future because we have been handed the opportunity to attend Upper St. Clair High School. If we are being honest with ourselves, we will probably admit that we never asked for this opportunity or worked for it. In short, we might not even deserve it. But here we are. And I strongly believe that there must be a reason we are here. Each of us can make a mark on the future that no one else can. Think about that. In a world of seven billion people, no one has your exact background, your exact beliefs, your exact dreams. No one else can do what you have been given the opportunity to do and the means to accomplish.

Even one person changes a statistic. What statistics will you change? What will you choose to become a part of? Some of these questions are beginning to be answered with the start of college. Some are yet mysteries. But this I know: If we always view the future as a distant dream, the goals that we wish to achieve in our future will never become realities. We must think of our future as simply an extension of the present, and in thinking this way, our future becomes now. Not after this ceremony, not on the first day of college, but right now in this moment. My hope for my classmates is that we have the strength to use our uniqueness to our full potential. For each of us to share our individual backgrounds, talents, ideals, and dreams, and in doing so become the best versions of ourselves that we can possibly be.

Upper St. Clair students are known for accomplishing great feats in short periods of time. I know I’m not alone when I say that on multiple occasions I’ve crammed for a test or an essay or a project. Admittedly, sometimes cramming fails. But if we have become so good at delivering excellence in such short periods of concentration, imagine what we are capable of doing in our entire lifetimes.

Excerpts of these speeches and other graduation-related information are printed in the fall 2016 issue of UPPER ST. CLAIR TODAY.