

Upper St. Clair High School Commencement 2017

Opening Remarks

Angela Petersen, President, USC Board of School Directors

Today, I would like to expose a secret: the greatest gift of an Upper St. Clair education is that you have developed and take with you the ability to be a leader. Some of you have already discovered that you have leadership skills and have used them during your years here. But—and you will remember me telling you this—many of you will be surprised when the strangers in your “new world” look to you for leadership, sensing that you have the talents to create a path for success.

I would like to share something that I learned about leadership. *The Heart-Led Leader* by Tommy Spaulding taught me a life lesson. The key to being a leader is never to forget that everyone has a story, that not everyone tells his story, and that one doesn't always ask—a heart-led leader not only tells his story, he also asks.

When you meet new people listen carefully for their story. In the end, we are all human, we each have stories that have shaped our lives. Some stories end happily and some, regrettably, do not. Being a leader goes beyond identifying the roles and goals of a successful venture. Sharing the stories of the defining moments in your own life—the experiences that make you a unique individual—allows you to connect with others and lead at a human, heart-led level.

A heart-led leader sets the example for others to be open, candid, and even vulnerable. Look around you, at everyone in this stadium; we all have many things in common, among them hopes, dreams, and fears. Remember that when people feel safe they will share their vulnerability. Listening will help you understand the person you are working with. I'm not talking about ferreting out and exposing deep dark secrets, but about understanding the life events that made someone into the person standing before you. And realize that person who is your co-worker or team member is, in part, responsible for your own well-being and success. Accepting people unconditionally will result in deeper relationships, personally and professionally. Trust is the backbone of high-performance teams. If you want trust, you need heart.

It has been said that if you win the heart, the mind follows. One way to invoke the heart is to address the core values of loyalty, commitment, contribution, individual worth, dignity, and integrity. And don't forget compassion; a leader cannot have compassion for others if he does not have compassion for himself. Leaders with heart can still be demanding, hold people accountable, and have great expectations. But a heart-led leader has empathy for the people he leads. And, when times get tough—and, unfortunately, they often do—people want to be led by someone who cares and who makes them feel like they count.

I challenge all members of the Class of 2017 to measure your future successes by how many smiles your leadership generates. Judge yourself by a standard that asks if your service helped others to have a better day.

Superintendent's Address

Dr. Patrick O'Toole, Superintendent of Schools

I thank you, Class of 2017, for all that you have done to maintain and elevate the tradition of Upper St. Clair High School's rich and meaningful educational experience.

I would like to title my remarks as your “final five minutes of instruction.” Tonight, in this final lesson, I would like to reinforce a skill your teachers have been stressing for the past 13 years—the art of thinking.

The world you are about to enter—whether it be your work, your role as family member, or your role as citizen—will be anything but routine. It will require you to be a skilled thinker for your own development as well for as the good of your family, community, and country. Therefore, I offer this short review on learning to think, taken from David Goldsmith's book *Paid to Think*.

Goldsmith suggests that we intentionally engage in the following seven formal and informal learning opportunities that are all around us.

1. Read for awareness. There are literally thousands of print and online resources offering a variety of learning options from business to science to technology. The act of simply just scanning these differing perspectives and topics will help you and influence your thinking.

2. Read for learning. Engaging in deeper study of selected information will build your bank of knowledge and improve your understanding and decision-making skills.

3. Participate in continuing education opportunities, both formal and informal. By engaging with others, with similar or dissimilar interests as you, your mind stays fresh with new ideas and possible solutions to challenges you face.

4. Engage in child's play. Believe it or not, we can learn as adults much like we did as children, and it is much more fun! For instance, gaming technology that many of you use can help you learn to strategize and provide opportunities to collaborate with others.

5. Study great thinkers. Study the thoughts, values, and ideals of great thinkers, both past and present. Such study might help you to understand present problems and find new ways to solve everyday challenges.

6. Watch “stuff.” Through video streaming, you can literally travel the world, watch insightful lectures, or learn how to do most anything. Educational television programming, as well as YouTube videos and Podcasts, can teach you about faraway places, historically significant people, or even how to fix your car.

7. Finally, and most importantly, confirm the facts. Do not automatically assume that what you are reading or viewing is accurate. Even sources that may be assumed to be credible should be vetted for factuality.

In summary, Goldsmith's work informs us that the development and execution of thinking allows us to focus our energies on creating new opportunities and solving problems—two essential skills you will face as adults.

There is a great quote from author Sandra Parks that speaks to educators on the importance of student thinking skills. Parks writes, “Teach children what to think and you limit them to your ideas. Teach children how to think and their ideas are unlimited.”

Upper St. Clair Class of 2017, your education at USC has provided you with the critical thinking skills necessary to advance to the next level, whether you are headed to a college or university; to serve our country in the armed services, or to the workforce. It will be up to you to continue to further grow your thinking skills in order to create new opportunities and solve problems in your own home, in your community, in our nation, or in the world.

Student Speeches

Claire Zalla–Valedictorian

A few nights ago, I looked up from my computer where I was supposed to be studying for an exam, but was really binge watching *The Great British Baking Show* on Netflix, to find my mother glaring at me reproachfully from the doorway.

I sneakily dipped the screen toward me, thinking one of the bakers' laments about crumbly pastry or limp meringue had carried into the hallway, but my mom was actually surveying the state of my room. The clothes carpeting the floor, lonely shoes thrown in a corner, and books stacked in haphazard piles gave my room the air of a natural disaster zone.

“Are you going to warn your college roommate what a slob you are?” Mom asked.

I almost retorted, “My friends don't care. Their rooms are messier than mine,” when it hit me. My senior class would be going to college soon, away from everyone we had ever known. We would be meeting new people and making new friends. We would have to decide which parts of ourselves to leave out on the dresser, and which, if any, to sweep under the bed with the dust bunnies.

I knew friends are famously easy to make in college, but still. At that moment, I felt a strange mix of excitement and dread. I felt alone.

During the college search process, my parents emphasized one piece of advice: find your people.

What does that mean? Shouldn't we be worried about campuses or rankings or alumni networks or any of the other things that Naviance and College Confidential tells us is important?

I realized that when I look back on these high school years, I don't necessarily think of my classes, nor sports, nor band concerts. I think of the people. All the people we've met taking an unusual elective or picking up a sport. The ones we whispered to during assemblies or laughed within the walls of the cafeteria. The kind of people you can get completely lost with as you drive around Pittsburgh looking for that one waffle place, but have more fun rocketing down I-79 listening to the Chainsmokers than finding the restaurant. The kind of people you can text at 3 a.m. because no one knows how to do this chemistry lab. Maybe also the kind of people who spurred you to work harder, do better, if only to prove them wrong.

We've all shaped each other in one way or another, whether by saying “Hi” to each other in the hallway or picking up a runaway pencil. The small things often stay in our memories. Some ties are stronger than others, but it doesn't mean that brief contact has no effect on us. Those invisible connections will continue to multiply as we meet others. Who we are and who we choose to become once we leave USC for, perhaps, the last time will matter, not just to us

but to everyone around us. Whatever you do, find your people. They are the people with whom you will build the best friendships and make unforgettable memories. Thank you for the friendships. Thank you for the memories. Let's go make some new ones!

Allie Ryave–Staff Choice

If I've learned one thing at USC, it's that I am absolutely hopeless at math. I still couldn't explain a logarithm (sorry Mrs. Haas) or how to graph one. Still, as I try to figure out on what I should reflect upon, I've found some numbers that encapsulate everything I want to say to you today.

Thirteen years:

Since the first day of kindergarten, when we got onto that big yellow school bus and waved goodbye to our parents, to the last day of school as we left the doors as students for the last time, we have been the class of 2017. After 13 years together as a class and, at one time, braving middle school hallways, we are now gathered for the last time before we go our separate ways to start on our next chapter.

89.5%:

The dreaded cutoff point between an A and a B. How many of us spent nights cramming and stressing to try to pull our grades up above that marker. At this point, it's hard to remember in which classes we pulled those all-nighters, but we'll bring with us the work ethic and what we've learned, even if we may repeat those all-nighters once or twice more in college.

103–USCHS staff members

Even though we may not have interacted with every USCHS staff member, there's no doubt that every student in our class was at some point moved by an adult in the School District. We are fortunate to not only have teachers who inspire passion for the subjects that they teach, but also for teachers and staff who model the types of people that we want to become, encourage us to reach for our goals, believe in us when it feels like no one else does, and remind us that each one of us has passion and promise to offer the world. Regardless of how many times we joked about it, we really are a team.

732–number of days in four years of high school

Over the course of four years, we've spent 732 days together in USCHS. Seeing everyone here in our caps and gowns seems bizarre when it feels like just yesterday we were timid freshman, stepping off the busses and walking into homeroom on that first early morning at 7:30 a.m. sharp. As we became sophomores, juniors, and then seniors, we rolled into homeroom a little later and later, usually with a b-sammy or massive cup of coffee in hand. I now regret how many of those days I spent counting down until the weekend or the next break, when I wish I would've enjoyed every moment I had. Seven-hundred-and-thirty-two days sounds like a lot, but I think we can all agree that looking back, they flew by faster than we could have ever imagined. Especially considering that, statistically, only 146.4 of those days were pasta bar Tuesdays.

These four years not only taught us how to grow academically, but we truly learned who we were and how we fit in with the world around us. Not every one of the 732 days were good; many were difficult and trying. Some of them seemed like the last one we could handle. Still, we stand here together in our caps and gowns, 732 days later from the little freshmen we used to be. We fought the battles that our lives gave us and managed to make it here today. We found our friends and clung to them fiercely, we met our mentors and worked to grow like them, we found our passions and pursued them.

732 days seems like forever, but as we spent them, one by one, it's hard to believe we don't have any left.

364–Students in our class:

I feel truly honored to stand here and represent my 363 classmates sitting before me. The class of 2017 has some of the most talented, passionate, and dedicated people I've ever met. We've spent the past four years growing together to be the group that we've become.

Thirteen years, 89.5%, 103 staff members, 732 days, and 364 students in our class. While these numbers shaped the people who we are today, from here on out, they now become a part of our history. When we receive our diplomas today, we lose the security of being one of 364. We are now just one: individuals ready to take on whatever the world will throw at us. The resources our school has provided and the lessons we've learned along the way will only matter if we use them as building blocks to achieve something greater as we move into the next chapter of our lives. These numbers will add up to nothing unless we decide that we are going to make them count. I believe in you, class of 2017. Let's take the lessons we've learned and the gifts we've been given and begin our journey from here. I have no doubt that we are ready to change the world!

Faley Bulazo–Student Choice

I've been thinking recently a lot about the past four years; I'm sure we all have been. What I've come to find, though, is somewhat strange. I've realized that high school is exactly like a trip to Disney World. Is high school the happiest place on earth? Maybe not, but hear me out.

The first thing to clarify is the fact that a high school senior is exactly like a five-year-old child. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. The number of times a high school senior asks, "Are we done yet?" is about the same number of times a child asks, "Are we there yet?" on a family road trip. We're just as impatient today as we once were.

Just as Disney World has five different theme parks, Pantherland has its different areas as well. We've got the athletes, the mathletes, the art students, and the smart students. This place, much like Disney, has it all. But the great thing about both places is that no one is forced to stick to just one area. You can get that four-park magic ticket and do it all. Now if you can't swim, maybe the Typhoon Lagoon isn't the place to be, but there is a park for everyone.

What would Disney be without its characters? Our teachers have a lot in common with these characters. They're the main event! High school certainly wouldn't have been the same without them. Just like Buzz Light Year taught us to reach for "infinity and beyond!" and Elsa taught us to "let it go," our teachers have shared countless lessons with us. When little kids meet their favorite Disney characters they smile, they laugh, and sometimes they run away crying in fear. High school students often do the same when they see our teachers.

But in all seriousness, we love our teachers, and we have so much to thank them for. They play a big role in creating the magic of our Pantherland.

Something else Disney is known for is its rides and attractions. Each ride has its ups and downs. Riding the Tower of Terror is very much like impatiently waiting for grades to be updated after taking finals. The fear of sudden drops is immense. Over the past four years, each of us has had his or her own and lows. Remember our first high school dance? How terribly, horribly, awkward we were! Remember when you got your driver's license and rushed to pick up your best friend to go grab ice cream? Friday night football games, first relationships, first heartbreaks—they all happened here. High school has certainly provided us with our share of roller coaster rides of emotions.

When evening finally rolls around, and you've been walking around the park all day under the beating sun, the exhaustion begins to set in. Kids are whiny and worn out, behaving a lot like second semester seniors. There is only one thing that can bring a tired-out mom and dad with screaming children back together at the end of the day: the magic of fireworks over Cinderella's castle. The scene can't help but take your breath away. The crowd simultaneously "ooooos" and "awwws" at the sight. You're reminded of the good times you've had that day and you start to feel a bit sad knowing that it'll soon be time to leave. The fireworks display is bittersweet. I can't help but think that this commencement ceremony today is much like the fireworks show above Cinderella's castle.

So class of 2017, you've just won the Super Bowl! Wait! Sorry wrong line! In reality, you've just graduated high school, and the question is "What are you going to do next?" If high school is the happiest place on earth, then where do we go from here? Leaving things behind can be sad, but the future is a magical place. Go find that four-park magic ticket for wherever you are headed in life and do it all!

As Walt Disney once said, "If you can dream it, you can do it. Always remember that this whole thing was started with a dream and... a panther." Well, Walt Disney may have said "mouse," but I think it's close enough. Don't you? Congratulations to the class of 2017!