

Upper St. Clair High School 2018 Commencement Speeches

Opening Remarks

Amy Billerbeck, President, USC Board of School Directors

Just about every graduation speaker across the country this spring will tell the graduating class: “You are going to change the world!” That’s a pretty tall order. You are probably saying, “That sounds great, but I doubt it... how am I going to change the world?” Let’s hold that thought for a moment.

In reflecting back on this school year, I think we would all agree that it has been a uniquely challenging year to be a student. You have had to respond to difficult events, like the tragedy in Parkland, Florida, and too many others—complicated by an environment of cultural and political “polarization.” It’s not hard to see that the world could use some changing!

But you seniors have responded with leadership and maturity. You have led student action and participated in activism that has been more significant than anything in a generation. You have had to wrangle with varying points of view among your friends and classmates, and you have learned civics lessons in ways you never would have learned in the classroom.

I know many of you were involved in organizing the assembly this past March to honor the memory of the 17 people who lost their lives at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. I didn’t attend the assembly in person, but I read the transcript. It was moving and powerful, even on paper. I was particularly struck by the words of your class president, Drew Hobart. Drew issued the “What’s Your 17?” Challenge to everyone at that assembly.

Seniors, you all know what it is. But for those in the audience who might not know, following the Parkland shooting, a tweet from a high school teacher went viral. During a protracted classroom discussion about whether to participate in a 17-minute walkout, a student suggested that a better way to honor the Parkland victims would be to pick 17 ways to make a difference in their own school climate.

Smile at 17 people you wouldn’t ordinarily smile at; say a kind word to 17 people you might not usually talk to; open your heart to 17 people you might not necessarily interact with. The mantra was “17 reasons for change; 17 ways to make a difference.” What’s your 17?

That student, and Drew, and all of you realized that each of you as individuals has the power to create a better, more compassionate environment around you, at school or wherever that is. Each of you can make some small connection or reach out to someone even in a small way. And like throwing the proverbial pebble into the water, those small actions will make ripples that will make the world around you a better place.

So, just like every other graduation speaker across the country this spring, I’ll say it: Class of 2018, you are going to change the world! You already are!

You have excelled academically, artistically, and athletically. We know! Dr. Suritsky reads pages and pages of recognitions and commendations at each board meeting. Those are awesome things, and we are proud of you for your accomplishments.

But more importantly, each one of you is changing the world every day in all the little things you do and in the ways you treat one another. You are making ripples. You may never know how you’ve changed a situation, changed someone’s day, or maybe changed someone’s life... but you are doing it.

So, as you leave Upper St. Clair, be conscious of the great power you have to change the world. What’s your 17? What kind of ripples will you make?

Class of 2018, go out and change the world. Make it a better place, a little bit every day.

Superintendent’s Address

Dr. Patrick O’Toole, Superintendent of Schools

In these final five minutes before you officially graduate from USC—a ceremony that in some ways represents your transition to adulthood—I want to let you know this: We need you. Who are we? We are the adult citizens, not only of our country, but the entire world.

We need you based on my observation of you these past 11 years as my role as the superintendent of Upper St. Clair. Dr. Angelo briefly offered representative testimony of how you are already making a difference. I submit that our country and the rest of the world needs young men and women just like you. Now. Today.

My parents’ generation, labeled the “Greatest Generation” by author and journalist Tom Brokaw, faced the enormous, almost incomprehensible, challenges of the Great Depression and World War II. In fact, my father and my seven uncles fought in WWII—one of whom gave his life for us—so we could convene here tonight.

Members of my generation—the Baby Boomers—also fought and died in wars to preserve our freedoms. We also turned much of our attention toward improving domestic challenges of poverty, race relations, drugs, and global peace.

The success of my generation will be one for historians to sort out. But my perspective is that our work remains “incomplete,” so we need help—**we need you**—to help us solve these challenges at home and abroad. We need your brain power, your passion, your vision, your authenticity, your compassion, your voice.

During your education at Upper St. Clair, you were exposed to the concept of STEM (or STEAM) education that focused on our country’s economic need for knowledgeable workers in science, technology, and design. The intention was that because of the need for such workers and thinkers, students choosing these fields of study would position themselves well for future career options.

But in these final minutes, let me ask you to also contribute your knowledge, your skills, and your energy toward the social sciences, such as government, politics, education, race relations, drug prevention, and the prevention of extreme violence in our society. In these areas, **we need you** because there remains unfinished business and difficult issues are emerging for all of us to solve.

I’m not asking you to make a sudden change in your college choice or career path. Your contributions to such matters as education, poverty, and government can be careers, but they can also be avocations and volunteer work. For example, behind me are school board members: men and women who have successful careers in finance, healthcare, law, insurance, engineering, and research. But they also devote considerable time and energy to the community and to the education of children other than their own.

One of my favorite leadership quotes comes from Claudio Fernandez-Araoz, a global expert on talent and leadership, who says that great organizations are made up of people who “have a fierce commitment to excel in the pursuit of unselfish goals.” Upon your graduation from USC, I welcome you and your talent to the organization of adults, with deep faith in your “commitment to excel in the pursuit of unselfish goals” that helps our nation and the world in which we live.

We have big issues to solve in our country and in the world. But with young men and women, like you—members of the USC Class of 2018—I believe we have a new generation of thinkers and contributors arriving as adults ready and able to help. **We need you. We need all of you!**

Student Speeches

Wyatt Keating, Valedictorian

As the famed Western philosopher, Snoop Dogg, once said, “You gotta pay the costs to be the boss.” As we leave after our time here at Upper St. Clair High School, we must understand, like Snoop Dogg does, that although high school has come to an end, the level of seriousness with which we take responsibility for our lives and our desire to aspire for success will define who we choose to be in the future. In order to ensure success in our future, we must continue to take responsibility and pay the costs in order to reap the success and be the boss.

Ever since we were little kids, we have been fortunate enough to have a wonderful support system to bolster our growth and maturity, despite our constant thinking otherwise. Whether it be our parents, our friends, or our teachers, the people who surrounded us for the past 18 years of our lives helped mold us into the people we are today.

However, this support structure, while helpful, has ultimately caused us sometimes to be overly reliant on those around us and not fully responsible for paying the costs in our lives. All of our parents are probably worried sick right now about how we will be able to care of ourselves in a few months without people to help us with laundry, make us home-cooked food, help edit our papers, and be there for us when we get sick.

At the same time, as Snoop Doggy Dogg also says, “You don’t know where you are going unless you know where you came from.” I believe that Upper St. Clair High School has presented an educational environment that allows students to start developing self-responsibility from the moment they step inside the building. The opportunities for self-guided learning presented to students at this school are unparalleled, a philosophy administration has tried tirelessly to embed into all of our brains. At the same time, though, what makes me feel confident and responsible heading into my future, and what should make all of you feel comfortable, too, is the mindset of our grade: the mindset of an Upper St. Clair graduate, Class of 2018, a mindset focused on winning.

In our time in the Upper St. Clair School District, we have most certainly been the bosses of our own education.

We’ve heard it from the beginning, we’re an amazing class! In fact, our class has always been one directed with one goal in mind: the desire to achieve personal and group success. Whether it be academic, social, or athletic success, the class of 2018 has achieved milestones and awards that are unprecedented in Upper St. Clair history. We had almost half of our class inducted into the National Honors Society. We have had 26 students recognized by the National Merit Scholarship Program. During our tenure in high school, Upper St. Clair athletic teams have won two

PIAA championships, two WPIAL championships, and a multitude of section championships. Our academic clubs have garnered state championships and national qualifiers. Our senior class helped transform student council into a more representative and powerful branch of control in the high school. We successfully secured the rights to our senior prom at Heinz Field. This year, our seniors spurned the collection of \$41,098 for the Four Diamonds organization and childhood cancer care and research through our school's Mini-THON. Everything our class's hands touch turned to gold and success that appeases our collective goals. We have taken the responsibility of ensuring a fulfilling high school experience into our own hands and paid the costs to be our own bosses driven with success solely in mind. And still, echoing Snoop Lion, "You've got to always go back in time to move forward." In order to keep striving for success, we must recall the successes we thrived on in high school.

As we approach moving away from Upper St. Clair and branching off into various places around the world for college, the armed forces, and the labor force, one question remains: Will we continue to hold ourselves to a successful standard and ensure responsibility for our own lives? In three short months, we will pretty much be the "boss" of our own lives. The truth is that the concept of the future as an independent adult is genuinely and naturally scary. It will become easier to let go of responsibility for ourselves and our actions, and it will become easier to give up on the possibility of success in favor of mediocrity.

Yet, I challenge all of you to live through the next few years with the same vigor, desire for success, and acceptance of responsibility that defined our collective high school years. In the words of DJ Snoopzilla once again, "If it's flipping hamburgers at McDonald's, be the best hamburger flipper in the world. Whatever it is you do, master your craft." Whether you are going to college for the next two or four years, to the labor force, or to the armed forces, by striving for success, we will be able to replicate the experiences which made high school such a memorable experience for all of us. Additionally, by taking greater responsibility for our actions and voluntarily removing the safety net that has been provided to us, we can live our lives how we wish to live them and be loyal to our own desires and wishes.

Still, the next few years will undoubtedly be tough. Regardless, we all are ready to enter the unknown with no definitive idea of what the future holds. We will hopefully live our lives based on this final Snoop D-O double-G quote: "Be your own leader, be your own self, step out of the shadows and be your own person." Unquestionably, our desire for success will serve as a beacon of light in this unknown time as we choose to step out of the shadows and be our own person. In the spirit of the last four years of high school and the last 18 years of our lives, let us all live out our futures striving for the success we experienced in high school, while also remembering to take a greater responsibility for our own actions as we listen to the advice of Snoop and pay the costs to be the boss in our own adult lives.

Thank you and congratulations to the Class of 2018!

Elizabeth Petley, Staff Choice

Class of 2018, we did it! I would first like to apologize to all of the English teachers in the audience, because not only does my speech start with a quote, it is pretty much centered around quotes. Seeing as I am only (almost) a high school graduate, I still have a lot of wisdom to gain and life to live, thus, it'd be hard for me to impart words of wisdom on my classmates. Instead, I figured I could give my classmates, and everyone here today, some words of wisdom spoken at previous commencement ceremonies, and then apply these lessons to our high school experience and our future, kind of like the "highlight reel" of commencement speeches.

The first of these borrowed thoughts is from Ellen DeGeneres, who said at Tulane University in 2009, "Follow your passion, stay true to yourself, never follow someone else's path unless you're in the woods and you're lost and you see a path, then by all means you should follow that." While Upper St. Clair doesn't have too many woody areas where we can get lost, the first part of her sentiment still applies to everyone here today. As we continue our lives, there will always be the siren call of outside influence and others telling us what we should and should not do. It's important that we stay true to ourselves and do what we believe is right. Remember that following what your sibling did, or what your best friend is doing, may not work out so well for you. Instead, find a new way of doing something and make your own path.

I'm going to cheat here on my next one, because this pearl of wisdom wasn't given at a commencement speech that I'm aware of, but I think it still applies. This comes from our very own Doctor Frollini. As the wise Doc always reminded my sophomore year Chem class, "Failure is always an option." Now, let me be clear that I am not suggesting we all leave USC and fail college, or wherever our lives take us after today, but I think it's important to remember that a path to success includes failures and obstacles along the way. When we fail, it's important that we see it as an opportunity to learn and grow as a person, and we pick ourselves up and get back on the path to success. Take it from our very own girls' soccer team. When they won states our sophomore year, they proved that they could overcome all of the other teams and take home a huge victory for Upper St. Clair.

My last sentiment is from actor Ed Helms, who said at Cornell University in 2014, “I wish there was a way to know you’re in the good ole days before you’ve actually left them.” Fortunately for us graduating today, and for the young kids in the audience, we are still in the “good ole days.” Let’s create more memories and make each day count. From our Fort Couch socials, to homecoming, Sadies, and prom, we’ve found lots of opportunities to dress up and go out with our friends. Mini-THON definitely created some great memories for all of us, while helping to battle childhood cancer, as well. Even during the school day, from our more memorable classes to the annual pickleball tournament and boat races at the end of the school year, we certainly found ways to have fun and create memories. Memories that we will look back on and remember as the “good ole days” when we’re older. Since my entire speech was quotes, I’ll avoid ending with a quote. Instead, I’ll finish with my own words. I wish each and every one of my classmates success and happiness in life, regardless of where it takes us and where we go after tonight. And guess what? You can quote me on that!

Jack de la Parra, Student Choice

Three hundred forty-four.

Three hundred forty-four students sitting on this field in black and white caps and gowns, sharing their final moments together as the class of 2018 at Upper St. Clair High School. In the 1000+ combined years of high school we’ve shared together, we’ve made tens of thousands of memories to reflect on for the next 70 years.

We sure are a unique class. We brought about many firsts and lasts that few other graduating classes could compare to. We were the first class with kids born in the new Millennium and the 21st century. On that end, we are the last class with 90’s kids. We were the first senior class to make “tie-dye” our senior colors, and we will probably be the last because, let’s face it, it wouldn’t be original. We were the first senior class to be a part of a lip dub, where hundreds of students worked in unison for an 11-minute video that will go down in USC history as viewers watch the whole dancing and clapping along to our senior song as the video fades out. We were the first class to ever have prom at Heinz Field. We are the last class to have swim gym in that pool inside and we’re going to be the last class to ever graduate in this stadium. We are the first class to see major construction being done on the high school in over a decade and five years from now, at our reunion, we won’t even recognize the place. And after hearing almost 15,000 times the ringing of the old mod bell, we became the first class to be dismissed from their last day of high school by the new door-bell sounding ring (and hopefully we’ll be the last).

We had 167 students wearing the panther black, white and red on the field, on the court, in the pool, or anywhere competing as a student athlete for USC. We watched 48 minutes of football for the first ten Friday nights of the year as the temperature dropped from 80 to 20 degrees from the start to the end of the season. Together we cheered at hundreds of athletic events all over the state. We also cheered on our Penguins to back-to-back Stanley cups (and we were hoping for a third!). We had 31 seniors receiving all-section honors, nine receiving all-WPIAL, and three receiving recognition at a state level or higher. We had 48 seniors in the music department, giving us halftime shows, parade performances, a musical, and a lot of cheer to our pep rallies and assemblies.

We have our fair share of kids who have called USC their home all the way from kindergarten until now—191 to be exact. But, we’ve welcomed newcomers from all over the world, with 13 seniors coming here from other countries, students coming from dozens of different states, and others coming from the region who made the right choice by switching to USC.

USC helped all 344 of us find our place and our people, with 68 different clubs and activities, most of which were led by seniors, and 87 different classes that we could take in our four years here. With the help of 143 teachers and faculty, we’ve been able to accomplish many outstanding academic achievements. We have 17 valedictorians, 11 IB Diploma Candidates, and 151 seniors graduating with honor cords. In our next steps academically, the Upper St. Clair High School Class of 2018 will be represented at 85 different colleges and universities next year, ranging from the 28 students going to Penn State this fall to the 41 students who will be the solo representatives of this class at their respective colleges.

We have put in a ton of work to get to this point in our lives. Homework assignments, projects, and studying have taken weeks out of our high school careers. We were the guinea pigs when it came to finals structure, as we struggled through six different formats of finals in our time here. We’ve seen a full year of winter combined over these four years, and those 41 days of winter break didn’t help all that much. Despite not getting a single two-hour delay last year, we had a total of seven snow days and 13 delays, making that 7:30 a.m. start time become more manageable. There are a number of seniors on this field who have stuck it out for all 732 days of high school, bolstering perfect attendance their whole career at USCHS.

We went to nine high school dances together, as we set a record at homecoming this year with 906 attendees. We had one of the latest homecomings ever, only ten days before Halloween, and one of the earliest Sadie’s ever, happening in late-January. We also danced all night at the second mini-THON ever as the 93 seniors who came to

the event, along with dozens of others who helped contribute or organize along the way, helped raise \$41,098 to fight childhood cancer!

For all the data I've been able to collect for this speech, there are so many things I wish I knew. How many breakfast sandwiches have we ordered at school? How many times have we been called a Panther fan by Mr. Holzer, or a team by Dr. Angelo? How many tests have we taken? How many times have we missed the bus? How many times have we "felt sick" on a day we came in late? How many times have we said "hi" to a friend in the hall? How many times have we chosen hanging out with our friends over all the other things we were supposed to be doing? The best part about all these intangibles is that there is no one right answer, or statistic, that can quantify these memories, making each and every senior's high school experience different.

Three hundred forty-four Upper St. Clair High School graduates from the class of 2018 are here today. These 344 are capable of changing the world. A future president of the United States could be sitting among us. We could have a Nobel prize recipient, a gold-medal Olympian, a Grammy-winning artist, or an Oscar-winning actor sitting in these chairs. Some of you may go on to coach your kids to rec basketball championships or even watch your kids graduate on this same field 30 years from now. The exciting part is that we don't know what the future holds, but here's to hoping you do your taxes right the first time, and that you don't forget to pay your utilities at your first apartment. Here's to hoping you have as much pride for the small accomplishments as you do for the big ones, because while we will forever be a part of this group of 344 students, the Upper St. Clair High School Class of 2018, we are all about to start creating our own set of future experiences, statistics, and achievements. We may be done counting the past, but we've sure made the past count!