

Huntington High School's 157th Commencement

Valedictorian Aidan Forbes' Address

First I would like to thank my Irish counterpart Aidan McCooey for that introduction.

I feel I must begin by saying how incredibly honored I am to be able to speak at this ceremony. I would like to thank Mr. Polansky, the district administration, Mr. DiGiacomo and the Board of Education, our Principal Mr. Cusack, Assistant Principal Mr. Smith, and our deans Mr. Caleca, Mr. Gilmor and Mr. Wilson. I would also like to thank my parents and my little brother Emerson for their love and support, without which I would not be here speaking to you today.

Congratulations class of 2018 - we finally made it! Here we stand on our last day as high school students, and it is truly remarkable how much we have changed over the years. We have learned to read and do math, and then learned how to use the internet so that we wouldn't have to read and do math. We have spent years developing a solid grasp of the English language, only to revert to using mostly three-letter words such as "lit," "sus," and "fam." To those of you who don't know what those words mean, I have nothing but respect for you.

But now, as we prepare to leave behind the comfort of high school, and enter the quote-unquote real world, we cannot help but ask ourselves, are we ready? I always thought that I was ready for the real world. And then I went to my first party. Whatever image comes to your mind when you think of a high school valedictorian at his first party... it's that. All of that algebra, chemistry, and physics were of absolutely no use to me then.

But what I learned that night was that I was not at all prepared for the real world. I would go so far as to say that it was a pretty stressful experience. But as I

attempted to look natural standing nonchalantly next to the house plants, I was reminded of a YouTube video I watched long ago featuring a Rabbi by the name of Abraham Twerski, who I am sure you're all familiar with. Anyway, he said, "Times of stress are also times that are signals for growth." Essentially, what he was talking about was as lobsters grow, they are crushed against the walls of their rigid shell and start to feel uncomfortable. It is at this point in which they find a new, larger shell. His point was, of course, that growth is difficult and stressful, as is giving this speech.

So why am I talking about lobsters? Well, I mention them because, like them, we are all about to leave our shell, the Huntington School District and the Huntington community, behind. Without a doubt, the schools and the community here have been good to us. And by that I mean I am not standing here because I am good at math or science. I am here today because my piano teacher, Ms. Lera, instilled in me the value of a strong work ethic before I even stepped foot in this building. I am here today because my second grade teacher, Mrs. McManus, told me that I could read a book, an actual grownup book, if I just sat down and tried to. I am here today because my travel soccer coaches taught me the importance of teamwork, and to take responsibility for my own actions. It is people like them and so many more who allowed me to get to where I am today.

But while we have to give credit to the community that nurtured us, we also have to recognize that in some ways it shielded us from the outside world. It was our shell, and if we are to continue to grow, we must shed it. And that process will be painful. We will leave our old friends behind, although hopefully not permanently, and be forced to find new ones. Whether you are going to college or not, we will all be faced with new, more rigorous challenges. We will also have to find new ways to fill our free time with meaning and purpose. And all of this will be difficult.

Something else Rabbi Twerski mentioned is that if lobsters had doctors, they would never grow, because they would be prescribed a valium or a percocet and feel no need to leave their shell. And that option, to accept defeat, will always be available. It is up to us to have the willpower to keep pushing outward because once we manage to find that new group of friends, to succeed in our school work or careers, and to discover new things we are passionate about, we will have found what is essentially our new shell. It will not only be comfortable, it will allow us to continue to grow and become the people we were always meant to be.

With all of that said, I would like to offer one final thank you to everyone who made this night possible and wish my class good luck in all of your future endeavors. Congratulations class of 2018. To paraphrase our President, we are a great, great class. Very special. Very beautiful. Really terrific. Everyone agrees.

Thank you.

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Principal Brenden Cusack's Address

Good evening parents, guests, faculty, members of the board of education, central administration and most important, the graduating class of 2018. Over the past four years, you have worked hard and faced many challenges to get to this moment. During that time, you have truly impressed all of us with your talents and your determination. You have made your mark here as scholars, artists, athletes and performers, and I could not be more proud of you.

Believe it or not, at the beginning of the school year, I start thinking about what I'd like to say to you on this very day. In fact, to a certain degree, I started thinking about this when you came here as bewildered freshmen on orientation day. I looked forward to this moment in time and began wondering what words I could share with you right before you leave us. What might make some sense to you four years in the future?

These thoughts have swirled around for the last four years leading up to this very moment, when I get just a few minutes to send you off with some parting words. I say that these ideas "swirl" around... If you're anything like me, that might be a fairly accurate description of the way in which thoughts arrive. Ideas don't enter our minds with numbers attached to them, prioritized in order of importance and set up in a neat list. Instead, they simply come and go, and swirl around until they are either used or thrown away. This can be frustrating.

Ideas can sometimes come all at once and sometimes they don't come at all, especially when you need them on an important test, asking someone out for the first time, being interviewed for a job or at other moments when you'd most like to have the perfect thoughts enter your mind. When you'd so love it if your life could be like a movie, and the perfect line would be right there in front of you. But it doesn't work that way. Instead, ideas come at us in such a way as to either overwhelm us in waves when we are stressed out or leave us flat when we need them the most.

Ideas, in some ways, can be a source of chaos in our minds. We are left with the difficult job of taking these swirling, elusive pieces of information and numbering them, prioritizing them and making meaning of the world around us by

using them. This is the process of creating order from chaos. This is the process of deciding what is most important to us, and this is no easy task.

On an emotion-filled day like graduation day, it is natural for lots of questions to present themselves to you. Questions like, “what *is* most important to me?” “What will I be doing years from now?” and “How am I going to live a happy life?” may be at the forefront of your mind. These questions can be overwhelming and scary, and they are, in fact, completely natural. Over the next few weeks, months and even years, many people will tell you to do what makes you happy. “Just do what makes you happy and everything else will fall into place.” “Choose a job that makes you happy and you’ll never have to work a day in your life.” I’d actually like to challenge that idea. The goal of life is *not* to just be happy. The point of all of this is not to simply do things that make you happy. If your goal is just to be happy, you may have a hard time figuring out what that actually means, and you may be missing the bigger picture.

Happiness is not the goal. Happiness is the byproduct of a meaningful life. If you are able to decide, over the next few years, what is truly important to you and to the world around you, and you put all of your focus, attention, drive and effort into that one thing, the end result will ultimately be your own happiness. There will be challenges and obstacles as you begin to develop an understanding of what is meaningful to you, but once you do, all of those other swirling questions and ideas will come into focus. You will find order in what might sometimes feel like chaos, and your happiness will unfold for you throughout the years.

Wiz Khalifa once said... (yes, believe it or not, I’m going to quote Wiz Khalifa)... he said, “Being happy doesn’t mean that everything is perfect. It simply means that you have decided to look beyond the imperfections.” It is true that there will always be challenges and imperfections to deal with. Sometimes it can feel like as we progress and solve problems, we just end up trading them in for other issues. But if you have an understanding that your main job is to make meaning of this chaotic world by deciding what is most important, you will be well on the way to finding success and happiness on your own terms. That is my wish for you.

Class of 2018, may you be truly blessed as you go forward. Remember where you came from, that we will always, always love you and that you will forever be Blue Devils.

Thank you.

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School Board President Thomas DiGiacomo's Address

Seventeen or 18 years ago, as your parents were taking you home from the hospital, your high school graduation was the furthest thing from their minds. Thoughts of when would you take your first steps or say your first words were more prominent. Casey's first words weren't Mom or Dad, but "Happy," a tribute to our dog, a Black Lab and our constantly saying her name. I am sure your parents remember your first words as well your first day of kindergarten, but suddenly, here we are today at your high school graduation.

Since that first day of kindergarten each of you have had experiences that have helped shape who you are today. Those experiences may have started during your time at Southdown, Jefferson, Washington or Flower Hill. I am sure each of you can think of a fond memory of that time. Maybe it was the fall festival with the pumpkin patch, field day or a performance you did during a lip sync show. Perhaps math night, movie night or simply a new friend that you made. Whatever it was it was the start of you discovering your interests, likes and dislikes.

When you left primary school you then arrived at Jack Abrams or Woodhull. Ultimately converging as one fifth grade class at Woodhull. New friends, events and moments continued to influence you. You chose your first instrument; would you be playing in the band or the orchestra? Do you remember the trip to Greenkill? Was it the first time you were away overnight, without your parents? Some of you might have been worried and none more so your parents. Did you try out for a part in one of the plays like Aladdin Jr or The Music Man? Was there an awesome art project you did

with Mr. Hixcox? Let's not forget the rocket launch, field day, the walk down to Cinema Arts Centre and of course the year end luau.

Your time at Woodhull would come to a close having discovered new things, making new friends and continuing to grow. At Finley you became Falcons, ready to spread your wings. You were changing classes every period, learning new subjects and battling with your lockers; yes those lockers. Maybe they didn't opened the first time or even the second time as you raced to get to class. But there were clubs to join and sports teams and more plays to try out for. There was band, orchestra, chorus, art, tech, health and a foreign languages to learn. You may have had a Regents class or two along with homework; lots of homework. With all of this though you were determined, worked hard and continued to identify what interested you. And in only two years, it was done and you arrived here at Huntington High School.

For some of you, Huntington High School may have seemed intimidating; for some parents it definitely was. A bigger building with lots more students and why did you have to get up so early? Your classes were even more rigorous and who and what was this Blue Devil all about? High school expanded your opportunities to grow, learn and be challenged; with even more clubs to join and teams to try out for. You could explore more in science, math, humanities, music, art, photography and film and as well become more fluent in your foreign language. The musicals and dramas challenged you to be a better performer. In clubs like Habitat you helped to build a home. Mock trial headed to the courtroom where you found your inner litigator. With robotics an opportunity to challenge your creativity, engineering and marketing skills. Relay For Life showed your generosity in raising over one half a million dollars towards cancer research over your

four year hear. And, of course, athletics where you worked hard to excel in your sport and learned the value of teamwork and your teammates and how to work together to win.

Because of these experiences and so many others, both in and out of the classroom you have become the “who” that you are today.

You’ve come a long way since your first day of kindergarten; over 13 years, which happens to be a total of 2,340 school days.

So as each of you leaves here today, I wish you only the best that life has to offer. There will be more challenges to come and new friendships to make.

You will continue to discover and rediscover the “who” that you are.

But today, even as you leave, take the memories and experiences of Huntington High School with you and know you will forever be a Huntington Blue Devil.

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Superintendent James W. Polansky's Address

Good evening and welcome to Huntington's 157th commencement exercises. I'll say it again; we should all take pride in the fact that very few districts can boast of such a rich history and storied traditions.

Not only will you leave here today with a diploma, you will leave with a diploma from Huntington High School. This school, all the schools you have attended during your formative years, the community in which you have grown up ... don't minimize the significance of how have they have helped shape you as a person.

Throughout these years, I am sure you've experienced great days and other days you'd like to forget; immensely happy moments and bouts of sadness; individual triumphs and likely a few disappointing failures. Recognize that each of these episodes has contributed to your growth, maturation and persona. Take pride in the fact that so much of it has happened right here in Huntington!

The beauty of commencement centers on the fact that you have a blank slate in front of you. The past, however, is the material that makes up the slate itself. Your parents, siblings, family members, friends, teachers, administrators, neighbors and others have contributed elements to this material. This material will surely impact the pathways you choose and the decisions you make. You will continue to mold a life for yourself based on these choices and decisions. Realize right now, if you haven't already, that not every choice is going to be perfect. It is important that you learn from less productive decisions; that you grow as a result of missteps.

There are plenty of cliché stories about currently successful individuals who began their adult lives penniless, making failed attempts at one thing or another. What these individuals have in common is their conviction and resolve – qualities among others that I wish for you to continue developing.

A few other quick thoughts that I'd like you to leave with this evening, or look at them as commitments that I'd like you to make to yourselves ...

1. Each of you possesses a gift in some regard and may need help in another. This is why the concepts of synergy and collaboration are so important. The whole is, in fact, often greater than the sum of its parts. This is characteristic of community; the same can be said of society. Be humble. Don't ever approach

something thinking that you are better than anyone else. At the same time, don't walk around thinking that anyone is better than you.

2. Truly recognize your potential and make an effort to reach it. Imagine if every individual on the planet lived up to his or her own potential. Think about how much better off we might be as a society. Now imagine if just half of the world's people lived up to their potential. Still an awesome scenario.
3. Take action. 2017-2018 has been the year of the student voice like no other and I am so very proud of all of you. To quote film and television actor Bradley Whitford, "Every story you've ever connected with, every leader you've ever admired, every puny little thing that you've ever accomplished is the result of taking action." You have a choice. You can either be a passive victim of circumstance or you can be the active hero in your own life.
4. Your character won't be defined during times of plenty or when pats on the back are in large supply. It will be defined during those moments of challenge or in situations where there is no right answer. Take ownership of and reflect on what you do and how you respond. As I mentioned earlier, there is absolutely no shame in admitting to and learning from an error.
5. Along similar lines, be the type of person who stops to pick up trash on the floor because you take pride in where you live and work even though it's not 'officially' your job.
6. In recent times, we have heard all about "fake news." The take-away – don't jump to conclusions based on the last thing you hear. Evaluate situations for yourself. Make your own well educated judgments.
7. Commit that random act of kindness every day. Be the people who set the stage for caring and compassion. Be the individuals through which friends like Patrick Hannon, Jose Granados, Joey Manaker and Eli Mollineaux will continue leave their legacies.

In closing, I ask that you continue to stand as proud and as tall as you do tonight. Work hard, do great things in life and don't take anything for granted. And remember, always remember, that this place we call Huntington will forever be your home.

Congratulations and best wishes!