

## **Huntington High School's 161<sup>st</sup> Commencement**

### **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 2022. I am so happy to have everyone here this evening once again on our home field to celebrate this wonderful achievement together. I would be remiss if I did not also mention, as Mr. Polansky did, those members of your class who should be with you here today, Victoria Gaines, Eileen Hernandez and David Fuentes. We truly miss them and we wish they were here, though we know they are with us in spirit today.

Today, as you all know, is a very special day. This whole ceremony, which takes so many people and so much effort to put together, is all about you, our soon-to-be graduates. We are celebrating the fact that you have achieved an incredible goal and you are passing through a very important milestone in your lives. As the father of a high school freshman and middle schooler now, I have a new perspective when reflecting on graduation, as I will be up in the stands of my son's school not too long from now, just like your families are tonight. On that day, you'll know exactly where I am in that crowd... I'll be the one with a giant pile of crumpled up tissues beside me, blowing my nose and blubbering and crying like a baby and probably embarrassing my kid for years to come. I get choked up seeing all of you graduate, and I can only imagine the overwhelming feelings that come with seeing your own child cross that stage. I will be a mess for sure. That's how important this evening is. That's the effect it has on us all. And that's why what I'm about to say may seem strange. My message is this: achieving goals is

underrated. Getting across the finish line, while special and important and emotional at the moment, is really not the most important thing in your life.

I guess the question is, why would I say that? Especially right at the moment when you are celebrating one of these important moments? My answer is simple... it's because once a person achieves a goal, what's the very next thing they do? They set another goal. And when they achieve that, they set another... and another... and another. And it never actually ends. No matter what your definition of success might be, it will never be enough. As humans, we are hard-wired to never be satisfied. That's just what we do. But I do believe there is a simple solution to this never-ending cycle of achieving goals and creating new ones. In order to make it all worthwhile, in order to ensure that our lives are lived to the fullest extent possible and in order to truly spend our days with a sense of satisfaction and peace we must always remember that the journey itself, from one goal to the next, with all the associated ups and downs, is what truly matters most. It's the space in between those moments of achievement where we live most of our lives. If we're too hyper-focused on our goals, we may very well miss the joy of the journey.

So try to savor those moments and the people who join you along the way. Stay present in between the milestones and accomplishments, even in the challenging times and realize that in many ways, the journey itself is the goal. It's along this path that you learn and grow and change for the better over time.

Over the course of my ten years so far here at Huntington High School, I've been blessed to witness over 3,000 students walk across the stage to get their diplomas. And it never gets old. It never gets less emotional or meaningful. This

ceremony and every handshake, or fist bump or elbow-tap... every single one represents a great deal of work and perseverance to get to this moment. It really is a special day. Just don't miss the opportunity to really appreciate each moment of the journey between now and your next achievement. The very wise words of Michael Gilmor sum it up perfectly, "Don't be so focused on the end result that you miss the miracles along the way..."

Class of 2022, may you be truly blessed as you go forward. Never forget where you came from, remember that we will always, always love you and know that you will forever and always be Blue Devils.

Thank you.

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### **Salutatorian Luke Rinaldi's Address**

Thank you Jahiem. Good evening everyone, thank you all for coming to share in the accomplishments of the class of 2022. Before I begin, I'd like to thank superintendent Mr. Polansky, Principal Mr. Cusack, Assistant Principals Mr. Smith and Ms. Williams, deans Mr. Gilmor, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Watts, the board of education, as well as all the outstanding faculty and staff who have helped us along our way.

I'd also like to acknowledge the friends and family of all our graduates. Especially mine. You all have made our high school experience a time we'll never forget.

It's funny to think that just a few short years ago, 13-year-old me was hurriedly racing around the halls of Huntington High School during freshman orientation, scoping out the place which would be my home for the next four years. I imagine that we all went through some variation of this experience, back when many of us were no taller than the podium I now stand behind, or maybe that was just me.

As school supplies were purchased and schedules were solidified, we readied ourselves for the next chapter of our lives: high school. For me, and probably for many of you, the first day of school was a time of nerves and excitement. I lugged around my two 10-pound binders in my arms with my 40 pound backpack slung over my shoulder, staring in awe at the seniors who

towered over me. I argued with my classmates about the existence of the third-floor pool, and about which colors correspond to which class subjects. It was definitely intimidating at first, but after a while, we began to hit our stride.

The rest of freshman year zoomed by, as we all grew a few inches and learned a few things. Sophomore year came with a newfound sense of confidence, as we had finally grown used to Huntington High School. It was shaping up to be a great year. We even got a two week break from school in March! Lucky us! Little did we know however, that this two week break would last a bit longer than advertised. The rest of sophomore year was practically a blur. Even so, we remained confident that junior year would bring new experiences and much more to learn.

With the constraints of the pandemic still in full effect, however, our junior year also fell victim to COVID. Spending it at home yielded an uncomfortably long, but also ridiculously short third year at Huntington. If there was one silver lining that existed as a result of the pandemic, it was the strengthening of our bond as a class. Spending so much time away from normalcy, we began to crave it. Odd as it may sound, the pandemic made us want to go to school. It made us want to get involved with our classmates. This was the mentality with which we concluded junior year. And just like that, we were seniors. We had persevered through nearly two years of hybrid learning, always making the best of an uncomfortable situation. For our efforts, we were rewarded with the ultimate prize: parking spots and senior privileges.

Personally, I will always cherish the little orange sticker affixed to the bottom left corner of my windshield and I will forever be upset that the Chick-

Fil-A run could not be completed in the confines of one period.

Even so, senior year was a time of hard work and celebration. It was the culmination of the past 12 years of our education. For that level of dedication alone, we should all be proud of ourselves. It's been my pleasure to see all of you grow and flourish within the Huntington School District, and I know that we are all destined for great things.

As Huntington students, and now as Huntington alumni, I am confident that we will always have this place, as well as each other. No matter where our paths may take us, we will have Huntington linking us together. Our futures are bright. We have a lot to look forward to. But for now, it's enough to sit here in our caps and gowns, with bright orange stickers on our windshields and surrounded by our classmates. I will miss all of you.

Thank you. It's been a long way.

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### Valedictorian Erin Ye's Address

Hi guys. Before I start, I would like to thank my parents and my brother. I love you so, so much. I'd also like to thank my friends. You guys are family and because of you I am changed for the better. I'm so grateful, I love you, and please promise to take pictures with me when this is over. Okay, are you ready for it?

Good evening students, parents, teachers, administrators, and friends. Today is a good day. I was pretty nervous to deliver a speech in front of all of you, but then I remembered that I've been running my mouth in class for the past 13 years, so you're probably used to this already. I would still like to say that I'm incredibly honored and humbled to be up here today and to have the chance to address the Class of 2022 all together, one last time.

A quick disclaimer: I'm 17 years old, I'm afraid of ketchup, and I still can't drive, so please take everything I'm about to say with a grain of salt.

My friends from AP Lit could tell you that I had a really rough time coming up with what to say for this. I think what made it so difficult is that the 357 of us are about to diverge paths, and there's nothing I can say with certainty that will apply to all of us, except for the fact that we're moving on. It's scary.

High school, as I'm sure you're all aware, was not perfect. Sometimes, it sucked. But from those hard times, I think there is something to gain, and I believe that you should take what you need from these past four years to shape your future.

And maybe that isn't physics or math or history. It probably isn't. Maybe it's lessons like laughing off the small stuff and finding balance between work and play. When I think back on my time at Huntington, I know I studied a lot, but what I really remember are the moments I couldn't have planned for.

The kickball tournament in my junior gym class. Stealing a Christmas tree on a long run in January and hiding it in the girl's track locker room. The many, many insightful and off-topic conversations I had with friends in class when we were supposed to be focusing on work.

Living in the now, appreciating the little things, that is what eventually shapes your character and your mindset. It's hard to know that the future is out of your control, but the present is entirely yours, so take advantage of that, and soak it all in.

As some of you might know, during my junior year I started asking a question on The Dispatch's Instagram every Wednesday. I'm two days late, but I have one last question for all of you: *What now?* I don't have the answer, but I have some thoughts.

If we could see our entire lives from start to finish, I think most of us would be shocked. You could be a completely different person ten years from now than what you're expecting at this moment, and that's a wonderful thing to think about. You're going to change and grow in ways that you could never imagine, and the best advice I can give is to embrace that journey every step of the way. But today, right now, we're graduating high school, so let's just focus on that.



I feel really lucky to have been born around the same time and to have ended up in the same place, at Huntington, with all of you. Among this class are the funniest, kindest, brightest, weirdest, most beautiful people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. Every single one of you is capable of greatness, and I encourage you to strive for happiness, whatever that means to you. Attack life with **voracity**, which I now know how to spell. Take risks. Be brave. Be kind.

The word valedictorian comes from the Latin root meaning goodbye. But I like the Chinese word for goodbye a lot better. It's zai-jian, which means "we'll meet again." So until then, go make big moves and tell me about them when I see you next.

Finally, I have a Taylor Swift quote for all of you, because it really wouldn't be me without one. "Long live the walls we crashed through. I had the time of my life with you."

Congratulations Class of 2022. It's been real. It's been fun. And it's about to get real fun. Thank you all.

Cue the music.

\*Please play the chorus of 22 by Taylor Swift through the speakers at this point.\*

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### **Superintendent James W. Polansky's Address**

Good evening and welcome to our soon-to-be graduates and their families, trustees, staff and honored guests. We assemble here this evening for a milestone occasion in the midst of eventful and ever-changing times. Honestly, it is becoming more and more difficult to keep up with state, national and global developments.

As we age, time seems to move more quickly and some past occurrences may become blurred in our minds. Truth be told, I don't recall what I did at 8:00 this morning, and it took me 5 minutes to find my keys before that. With that said, there are certain landmark events that remain indelibly etched in our personal memory banks, regardless of how much time has passed. Graduations, proms and weddings are but a few examples. As an additional example, I am sure my colleagues and many adult guests here this evening can recall exactly where I was when the tragic news broke on September 11, 2001.

On a much more positive note, I can also remember well my arrival in Huntington, with many of the introductions and interactions from that time replaying in my mind as if they just occurred. Most of you were 6 years old. Class of 2022 member, I am not sure how much you can remember from your days of toddlerhood, but let me help ...

- Netflix, Roku, Hulu and Vudu were not even twinkles in anyone's eyes. Your parents and I still rented from Blockbuster. Yes, we visited the store and paid \$4.99 for a videocassette or DVD in order to watch a movie on Saturday

night. For the record, Blockbuster filed for bankruptcy in 2010, and by 2014, all but one of its 4,000+ U.S. stores had closed.

- The iPhone back then was the iPhone 4, which featured 32 GB of storage and the first self-facing camera ... yes, the selfie was born. I also remember the app that allowed you to physically shake your iPhone to garner restaurant suggestions. There was no iPad, FaceTime or iWatch.
- Snapchat had not yet been born. TikTok was not even close. Instagram didn't enter the scene until October 6, 2010, but even so, it would be a few years until it grew to the level of popularity it has today. Back then, we still memorialized special events with photographs taken from an actual camera and we could just eat our food without posting a picture of it.
- If you owed someone money, you paid them by opening your wallet and handing them cash. There was no Venmo, Paypal or cryptocurrency. (This may not be a good time to mention cryptocurrency.)
- Food delivery was limited to pizza in warmer contained in a car with a Dominos or similar logo on top. There was no DoorDash or UberEats. Along the same lines, taxis still dominated the livery service market. Uber was a fledgling and Lyft had not yet arrived on the scene.
- Amazon's Alexa and other Smart Home devices would not enter the tech market until 2014. Before then, a little cylinder that listens to you and runs your household would have sounded like something straight out of "The Jetsons." Today, over 25% of households have one of these devices.
- And lastly, maybe it's just me, but politics seemed considerably less divisive back then. People were much more likely to simply get along ...

Class of 2022 members, as you venture off into the world, it may seem at times like your journey will begin into a sea of adversity. While the world has

certainly experienced its share of challenges recently ... a pandemic, deal with global conflict, violent tragedies and the cost of gas (and the media makes darn well certain that these and other negatives consume the headlines), there are so many positives occurring in your lives and in the lives of those around you each and every day that are all too easy to overlook and/or marginalize. Just look around you right now.

As you take your next steps, I implore you to heed the advice of Albert Einstein ... “Stay away from negative people, they have a problem for every solution.” And Mr. Einstein was a really, really smart man who did not have a Facebook, Twitter or Instagram account.

During your years in Huntington, I hope that you have much more routinely experienced a positive vibe and that you feel you’ve been genuinely challenged to grow as students and as human beings. Your progress and successes speak for themselves. And despite how you may feel at times or how others may make it seem, it is far from abnormal or uncommon for anyone to fall short, to lose or to feel pain at times. You will not always get what you want when you want it. That’s part of life ... the shortcomings and losses provide opportunities for growth and for you to work harder and/or differently.

During your time in Huntington, I hope you’ve recognized the importance of your voices, that you’ve felt respected as learners and as people, that it’s okay to agree to disagree and that, above all else, respect, understanding, empathy and kindness are critical elements of any conversation.

I’ll leave you with words from American fashion designer Tommy Hilfiger ... “We are in the new age where change is the only constant. I

encourage you to embrace it, to be inspired to push the boundaries, innovate and find your own unique ways to set the norms.”

In that light, live life your way and make it count. Continue to do unto others. Rejoice in what you have done together as part of this school community during your formative years. Take pride in what you did here and the legacies you leave, and make them the foundation on which you build further. Understand that you have so much to give and know that the memories and spirit of those who are unable to be here with us today, Victoria Gaines, Eileen Hernandez and David Fuentes, will live on through you.

It may sound cliché, but Class of 2022 members, this is not a goodbye. You will all carry a piece of Huntington and each other with you wherever you go next. It has been my honor and privilege to play even a small part in the beginnings of your journeys.

Best wishes and God bless.