Good evening everyone…

Last year, David McCullough Jr, a 26-year veteran English teacher at Wellesley High School in Massachusetts, gave a commencement speech that went viral. (If you haven’t heard it, make sure to Google it because it’s wonderful.) His “you’re not special” speech landed McCullough on the morning news circuit, trying to explain that the bulk of his 12 minute speech (mine will be MUCH shorter) was about a different message; not the one sentence, “you’re not special,” that seemed to spark so much controversy.

McCullough’s initial point was that having graduated from high school and heading off to a prestigious college doesn’t make anyone special; he pointed out that there were 3.2 million seniors graduating from 37,000 high schools across America. That’s a lot of people. He also alluded to the phenomenon of “helicopter parenting,” that evolved with this generation of children and talked about how much effort by parents, teachers and coaches contributes to a student’s success. We’ve been telling you you’re special since the day you were born.

It’s like that scene in the movie, The Incredibles, when the mother, Helen, tells her son, “Everyone’s special, Dash,” and Dash replies, “Which is another way of saying no one is.”
I decided to research what others say about “Generation Y” and found words such as “slacker,” “entitled,” indifferent,” and “trophy kids.” One site referred to you as “the Peter Pan Generation,” implying you don’t want to grow up.

I was disheartened. “Could this be?” I asked myself. “Are these really the students we’re graduating today?”

So I asked Mr. Hoops for a little help and found out what you have done, collectively, not simply for yourselves, but for others. Here are just a few examples:

1. You successfully hosted two Relay for Life events that exceeded all expectations and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the American Cancer Society.
2. After Hurricane Sandy devastated the tri-state area, you made repeated trips on weekends to Breezy Point, Queens, to help those that lost so much, rebuild and recover.
3. You “stuffed the bus,” collecting thousands of pounds of food for the hungry people in our community.
4. You traveled to Mobile, Alabama to help that community, still rebuilding after several storms wreaked havoc.
5. You volunteered countless hours at Huntington Hospital and for Huntington Interfaith Homeless Initiative to help the sick and the homeless in our community.
6. You tutored and mentored younger students and in some cases struggling students in our schools.
7. You brought joy to the elderly in our community, through the Grandfriends club and at the Senior Senior Prom.

(PAUSE) So, maybe, in fact, you are a little special.

Later in his speech, McCullough went on to emphasize that it’s not enough to do well—you must also do good. Clearly you, graduates, are on the right path. Because wherever your journeys lead—to college, career training or the military—you have a responsibility, an obligation in fact, to give back to others and contribute to the world in a meaningful way, when no one is keeping score or admitting you to college.

And this world really needs your help. In fact, we, the adults before you, owe you an apology. We’re handing you a world rife with violence and discord and a struggling economy. Our political leaders (on both sides of the aisle) can’t seem to get out of their own way to talk to each other in a respectful manner. It seems that civil discourse and compromise have gone the way of the Model T.

But I am an optimist. I have faith in your ability to affect change. I believe that you are the ones who will find solutions we don’t see and make choices that will profoundly impact the future. You have studied and grown up in a school community as steeped in diversity and tolerance as it is in tradition. If what you’ve done here in Huntington so far is any indication of what you’re capable of doing, then we should all breathe a collective sigh of relief.

I want to leave you with one last thought. In a few weeks, I will be attending the class of 1983’s high school reunion right here in Huntington. Just as you sit here now, we sat half-heartedly listening to speeches and eagerly anticipating the beginning of the next chapter of our lives. Even thirty years apart, we are bound by the excellent foundation provided here, at Huntington High School. There is something special about this place, and so in turn, about you.

On behalf of the board of education, congratulations--we know you will continue to make us all proud. Thank you.