

Huntington High School's 153rd Commencement

School Board President Emily Rogan's Address

Anyone who thinks it's easy being a trustee's kid should know it's not—it's the opposite of easy. I have to thank my son for his patience and tolerance for the past 8 years. And for listening to me constantly remind him, "you can't do that—I'm on the school board!" Thank you, Henry. I love you.

This evening is a joyful occasion to celebrate our graduates. But I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that someone is missing from this podium. Adam Spector loved this district and he loved commencement. In our last e-mail exchange on June 23rd, I promised him that I would deliver this message: I send my regrets for not being there and my congratulations to the entire community.

This is my third commencement speech—you'd think it would be a slam dunk by now. But I started worrying and obsessing about this speech literally the day after last year's commencement. Because today I'm not just standing here as the school board president. I'm just like all of you, the parent of a graduate, about to send my son off to college. I'm filled with the same mixture of emotions—joy, anxiety, pride, nostalgia—as all of you. And, while I'm always proud of our graduates, I often say the greatest privilege we have as trustees is handing out diplomas--this year it's personal because I've known many of you for years—some of you since pre-school. I've watched you grow up, reach milestones, triumph and fail. And many of you parents and grandparents here this evening, you are my friends—we've stood on the sidelines together in drenching rain and searing heat, sat through countless concerts, assemblies, plays, meetings, workshops and back to school nights. We've worried together, cried together, gossiped and celebrated together—thirteen years working towards this one day. This moment.

So yes, I'd say it's personal and I feel A LOT of pressure. I hope I can do this moment justice.

First, to the parents, families and caregivers: Let's take a moment to breathe a collective sigh of relief, shall we? For while our jobs certainly aren't done, it IS time for us to change our ways. We've had roughly 18 years to share our values, communicate our expectations, teach and challenge our kids. We've stepped in when we needed to and helped them navigate alone when we thought it necessary. Hopefully, we have empowered them enough to start the next leg of their journey—whether it's college, career or the military—to have the confidence to make decisions on their own and deal with the consequences of the choices they make. The best thing we can do now is step back and let them take the reins because if we don't, IF WE DON'T, then the message we're sending them is that we don't think they're capable. And they ARE capable. We just have to give them the space to know it for themselves.

So if you have a forgetful child, then the first time he leaves his key behind, locks himself out of his dorm room and has to go find someone to unlock his room, making him late for class or practice or dinner, then he'll learn to remember his key. Or, if like me you've been doing the laundry all these years and you say to your son, "But you don't know how to do laundry," and he calmly responds, "Then I guess I'll learn," you have to believe that he will. His whites may turn pink and his boxers may shrink, but he'll learn.

As for the graduates, this stellar class of 2014, I have so much I want to tell you. But I know you'd all like to have this ceremony end so you can get on with your celebrating, so I'll keep it short. I could speak to you about success and failure, about setting goals, about challenging yourselves and finding careers that satisfy you. But you've probably heard that a lot and will continue to hear it for quite some time.

This is what I'd like to share instead.

When you reflect on your time in Huntington High School, above all, I have to believe it was the human connection that mattered most, wasn't it? For all the classes, sports, clubs, trips, events you participated in, what made them matter most were the PEOPLE you were with. A favorite class had an impact because you connected with that teacher. A team-- because of the coach or even more so, your teammates. A club? The other members.

And then of course, there are your friends. I imagine that the hardest part about graduating is that you're leaving each other and heading off in different directions. Remember that nothing, not texts or social media sites, can replace the power of that human connection. You have the incredible opportunity to forge new friendships and relationships, even as you maintain the ones you already have. Be open to the possibility that your new friends might not look or speak as you do, might dress differently or foster opposing political and social views, but inside have many of the same goals and dreams as you. Make sure you give everyone a chance. Make eye contact. Smile. Say hello. Be mindful that your behavior and actions affect other people all the time. Choose your words carefully. Be kind and be compassionate. Always. We really need more of that in this world.

We lost a great humanitarian earlier this year. One of my favorite quotes from the late Maya Angelou stated: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Make someone feel valued and important. Do that and in turn, you will feel the same. I promise.

This is a time of contradictions: of anticipation and anxiety, excitement and fear, of sadness and joy, of loss and opportunity. Live these moments fully; be present in your experiences and know that all of them will create the wonderful complicated tapestry that is your life.

We are all proud of who you are today and can't wait to see what's in store for your tomorrow. On behalf of the board of education, I congratulate you on your commencement. Go find your way in the world and remember: your people - this community - will always welcome you home.