

# Huntington High School's 152<sup>nd</sup> Commencement

## Valedictorian Todd Colvin's Address

When Dr. Leonardi made the announcement that I was this class' Valedictorian, people were pretty shocked. The most common responses I heard were "What, you're smart?" or "I knew you were smart, but not THAT smart." Whenever somebody would say this I would smile and nod, because I knew that they meant it as a compliment. But then by the end of the day it kind of wore on me, when one more person said that to me I got fed up. I'm not proud of it, but I just had to tell that person, "Listen, Grandma, you probably should have known that by now."

It is an interesting task that I am assigned today, one where I get to talk about the upside of our years here. I say interesting because positivity doesn't play a major role in most conversations. Take the media for example- nobody would read a story about a cruise that went well, but add a blown engine and a few backed-up toilets and suddenly the nation is enthralled. People's fixation on the bad is the only possible explanation as to why Tim Tebow is now the most talked about New England Patriots quarterback. So, that is why I am so excited to give you my account of the past four years, to tell you why the glass is half full: why I believe in Huntington High School.

I believe that if you bet against the Huntington student body, then you are on the losing side of history. Who says that a Huntington athlete can't drop 20 points down the stretch of a close playoff basketball game, or an actor can't play Captain Von Trapp as well as anybody on Broadway? Who says that our generation, accused of being materialistic and selfish, can't collect two busloads of food to deliver to Huntington's food pantries? Who said that the Science Bowl Team isn't worthy of being mentioned in the Congressional Record, or that our marching band can't get 3rd in the state? It is never a wise idea to give a Huntington student the added motivation of having a chip on their shoulder, because it will rarely work out well for you.

And I also believe in the Huntington Student section. I believe in getting rowdy at football games, and telling the refs to check their answering machines if they miss a call, and I believe that if we are up by 2 touchdowns with less than a minute left, then it is time for your team to start the buses. I'm not saying that those are the nicest things to say, but nobody said that we had to be perfect! Our class at Huntington is passionate, we went hard or we went home. I also still believe that the lacrosse team won that Cold Spring Harbor game; there is no way that the shot that hit the crossbar was a goal.

But, mainly, I believe in the power of Huntington because I believe in the heroes who live here. I believe in John Cronin, possibly one of the most charitable kids in this school with his help in the Grandfriends Club as well as the food pantry at St. Hugh's, and his infinite capacity for love and enthusiasm that he is so blessed to possess. I believe in Ms. Paz, and Coach Kevin Thorbourne, and Mr. Troffa, and Mr. Bisogno and everyone else that taught me, through their actions rather than their words, what the definition of selflessness is. All of these are great people that dedicate their lives to making this town a better place, and I am a better person for having met them.

We should all take a step back and admire the sacrifice that the teachers here undergo. If you ask any teacher, of course they will say that they love their job. But my question is, why? Why would these people willingly choose to do a job where the responsibilities are either tedious, such as grading a hundred plus essays that all basically say the same thing, or impossible, like convincing a room full of college-accepted seniors to care about a Regents. Surely, some sort of sort of masochistic delight in punishment is the only logical explanation for why anyone would want to be a teacher.

No, I don't believe that these people are teachers because have a passion for sleep deprivation or low wages. I believe that they've found a sense of purpose in teaching, they're all individuals who made the decision that they would be happiest in a job where they can give back to society by educating the next generation. In the words of one college English professor, these teachers view love, "as a consequence of meaningful work instead of as the motivation for it.

But this selfless work ethic can't only be attributed to the teachers here. We need the unsung heroes too, such as the custodial staff. During the spring of my junior year, the lacrosse team was on a tear leading up to playoffs. After a first-round win against Islip, there was a lot of celebrating going on that left the locker room a mess. That was the final straw after a series of warnings about messing up the locker room, and one of the custodians came to us directly and asked, as politely as possible given the inherent frustration of the situation, if we could pick up after ourselves before we left. But then, almost as an afterthought, the custodian told us something that has stuck with me ever since. He told us that he had been buying bleach out of his own pocket to clean the locker room floor with, so we don't get Athlete's Foot.

And that got me thinking, why does he care so much? Most people would say, "your fungus, your problem." But then I realized that that's not how the people who work here think. Our fungus is their problem, too. They are driven by a deeper sense of purpose, an unscratchable itch to give back to their community. And that, ladies and gentlemen is why I believe in Huntington High School.

# **Huntington High School's 151<sup>st</sup> Commencement**

## **Laura Ironman's Introduction of Salutatorian Molly Prep**

Four years ago, I made a bet; that when Molly Prep and I were seniors, and she had received either valedictorian or salutatorian, I would get to write her introduction speech. Well here we are, after what seems like forever, conquering fears, overcoming issues and somehow, passing AP economics. These years haven't been easy, but I'm so glad I got to spend them with our next speaker.

Molly is always one for adventure, whether it's just ordering something new off the menu, or jumping over fire and conquering the Spartan Race. In the years I've known her, she's never been one for a mundane life style. Continuing the Adventures at NYU, I know I will be hearing stories of the epic experiences she will have.

If Molly has learned anything from these four years, it's to never make a bet with me, because I will win and then introduce her at graduation. Ladies and gentleman I give you this years' salutatorian, a Spartan, Ms. Molly Prep.

## **Huntington High School's 152<sup>nd</sup> Commencement**

### **Principal Dr. Carmela Leonardi's Address**

It is an honor for me to welcome students, faculty, parents, family members, our superintendent, Mr. Polansky, and members of the School Board here tonight. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the assistant principal, Mr. Cusack, all department administrators and deans for their continued support of students and their families.

A very special recognition is extended to the teachers and support personnel who are committed to the success of every student at Huntington High School and continue to take a personal interest in their academic and social development. Our gratitude is extended to secretaries, security and custodians who work daily to provide an optimal environment for students, teachers, administrators and parents.

Educators across the state know that in this age of standards-based educational reform and the overreliance on test scores as a measure of school success, a heavy demand has been placed on the professional and economic resources of public education. What remains special and unique about the Huntington School District, however, is the constant focus on the part of administrators and teachers to provide a balanced and rich experience for all students. A valuable public education is one that allows students to explore and spread their intellectual wings while building a strong academic foundation. The years our students spent at Huntington High School allowed them to learn, explore and compete. We as adults were fortunate to help them along the way and to rejoice in their creativity, their energy and drive.

This class above all others has worked to include everyone and to extend a helping hand. Relay for Life, in its second year, generated more community spirit, reached out to a larger sector of our Town and raised more money than the previous year. Students organized community clean ups following super storm Sandy and extended their support to the surviving students of Sandy Hook Elementary School.

One adventurous and high achieving student travelled to Israel for one semester while carrying an academic load that included three Advanced Placement level classes. Another, during the summer, became involved in ongoing cancer research. Member of this class are musically and artistically talented and will be pursuing their education in the field of music performance and fine arts. Athletes among the seniors in this class will also go on to compete in boys' lacrosse, football, baseball, swimming, wrestling and fencing as well as girls' lacrosse, tennis, dance/kick line, swimming and fencing. This is also a very fun, spirited class. I can personally attest to that since in one of the senior pranks this year my modest Honda Civic was put up for sale on Craig's List. I am still receiving inquiries about it.

This senior class also established strong supportive ties with peers, it was touching, in fact, to see how affected some of the seniors were by the end of their experience here at Huntington High School. On the last day of classes, they lingered in the hallways after dismissal and shed a tear or a laugh with their friends. It was clear that they will miss those who have become important to them. Each year a larger number of seniors challenged themselves with Advanced Placement courses that have the potential of earning them college credits. This year 150 seniors (up from 96 last year) took AP exams. 95 (53 in 2012) took three

AP exams or more with 9 (4 in 2012) seniors taking 6 and 18 (11 in 2012) taking 5 exams.

For this senior class the college center processed 2,092 (1,486) college applications. As of today, the Class of 2013 has been offered \$24,149,593 (\$12,849,554.00 was offered in 2012) in scholarship money.

College acceptances include Cornell University as well as various out-of-state public & private colleges including: American University, Boston College, Boston University, Bucknell , Carnegie Mellon, University of Delaware, Dickinson College, Emory University, Fairfield, Fordham, Iona College, Ithaca, Johns Hopkins University, Lehigh University, Loyola University (Maryland, Chicago and New Orleans campuses), Massachusetts College of Art and Design, University of Michigan, NYU, North Carolina State University, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Penn State, Quinnipiac, Rutgers, Syracuse, University of Southern California, Tufts, Vanderbilt University, Vassar College. All CUNYs (including the Macaulay Honors College), all SUNYs (including Nassau and Suffolk community colleges).

Some of the interesting majors they have selected include: criminal justice, computer engineering, architecture, education, molecular biology, athletic training, sports management, nursing, fashion design, illustration, speech pathology, baking and pastry arts, film/television production, mathematical methods in the social sciences, horticulture, pharmacy, and marine operations.

As you can see, our future will be in very capable hands.

And now a final thought for our candidates: As you pursue your dreams and expand your experiences, remember that “There is no failure, only mistakes that give us feedback and tell us what to do next.” (Warren Bennis)

Congratulations to each member of this graduating class and their families, may you continue to experience great success in your future endeavors.



# Huntington High School's 152<sup>nd</sup> Commencement

## Superintendent James W. Polansky's Address

There are so many things that can be said to these fine young people upon their commencement. All of you soon-to-be graduates have surely experienced life's ups and downs during your first 17 or 18 years. Some of those "ups" have been way up. I imagine some of those "downs" have been low. Indeed, your lives will continue to take twists and turns.

You all know such names as Albert Einstein, Bill Gates, J.K. Rowling and Michael Jordan; but do you know what they have in common aside from the fact that they are among the world's greatest success stories? Fact – they failed miserably at some point in their lives. Yes, each drastically muffed his/her chances at some point. This evening, I'd like to pay tribute to those who never give up, who continue to fight, and who are able to gather their energies to overcome obstacles – some small, some large.

"Success" – each of us wants it, and the sooner the better. But the concept of "success" takes on a different context for each of us; word of advice - do not let others define the concept for you. Use the tool at your disposal, a tool more powerful than any computer, smartphone or other digital device – your brain. A quote from Michelangelo about his legacy ... "If you knew how much work went into it, you wouldn't call it genius." First, your brain needs knowledge as much as food and oxygen. Desire and ambition mean that you will have to work both smarter and harder to gain this knowledge. Secondly, your brain is hard wired to endure. Indeed, obstacles may force you to broaden your determination. Third,

your brain accepts failure as a step toward success. Learn from the failure. Accept it as part of the journey to success.

The beginning of any work is often easy. But after some time, it is routine for those involved in the work to be faced with challenges and/or setbacks. They may choose to view the challenges and setbacks as end-point “failures” and, as a result, stop the journey in its tracks.

When difficulties surround us, we must be patient – not always easy in an age where technology more readily promotes a greater degree of “immediate gratification.” But mere patience is not enough; we must persevere with respect to the efforts leading toward goal achievement. Perseverance is the mother of good luck. Perseverance, when steadily practiced even by the most humble, will rarely fail to bring about success.

In the absence of patience and perseverance, other qualities such as intelligence and experience may not be of much value toward achieving success. Great works of literature and art and great invention are the results of patience and perseverance. Had their creators been impatient and indolent, most of them would not have seen the light of the day.

If we read the lives of great individuals, we find that almost all of them became “great” with the help of patience and perseverance. Albert Einstein couldn’t speak until he was four or write until he was seven, making his teachers think he was handicapped. He was even expelled from school. He ended up winning the Nobel Prize for physics.

Before building his empire, Bill Gates started a business called Traf-O-Data, which went nowhere, and he dropped out of Harvard. But his passion for computers and his vision of technological opportunity led him to start Microsoft and we all know what happened from there.

J.K. Rowling may be rolling in quite a bit of Harry Potter dough today, but before she published the series of novels, she was nearly penniless, severely depressed, and trying to raise a child on her own while attending school. She went from depending on welfare to being one of the richest women in the world in a span of only five years through her hard work and determination. And those who wish to “be like Mike” may not realize that he was not always viewed as a magician on the court. He was cut from his high school basketball team.

These accounts represent a much larger compilation of eventual “greats” with similar stories. And for all the future “greats” sitting in front of me this evening – the accomplished students, researchers, musicians, artists, athletes, and philanthropists, who have weaved so much into the fabric of the Huntington community, remember that it will not always be easy.

Along these lines, I’ll leave our graduates with three general suggestions. (1) Stay connected with your purpose. Maintain the vision of your desired end results, whatever they may be. (2) Believe in yourselves (very powerful), and recognize that more than half the battle is in your own minds. If you believe in yourselves, others will too. (3) No matter what your purpose or approach, retain your humility. That means never forget where you came from. Never forget that there are people less fortunate than you in the world. Never think that these people are any less than

you simply because they enjoy fewer privileges and remember that you have the potential and ability to help. The actions of a person with humility are guided not by money or prestige, but by the heart.

Now go out into the world and take it by storm. Do it with conviction and with compassion. I have no doubt that you will continue to make your former teachers and administrators, your families and friends and, most importantly, yourselves proud.

Happiness, health and good fortune to you all for many, many years to come.

# Huntington High School's 152<sup>nd</sup> Commencement

## Salutatorian Molly Prep's Address

Good evening everyone. I'd like to share a story with you tonight, and I promise it has a point.

This past summer, I worked for the Town of Huntington's Preschool Playground Program, I was a counselor for a group of three year olds. Aside from the normal camp activities, each day I would help the kids make a page for an "end of camp" memory book. Most days, they had to draw a picture of their families, or tell me about their favorite things. One day, I called over the campers to ask what they wanted to be when they grew up. Most giggled as they said, "A princess!" "A firefighter!" "Taller!!" However, when I got to one of the quieter girls in the class, she looked up at me with a steady gaze. "What do you what to be when you grow up?" I asked, to which she sincerely replied, "A tomato."

Under any other circumstances I would have laughed, but despite the adorable absurdity, I simply couldn't. "What?" I said, thinking perhaps I had heard wrong. "I want to be a tomato when I grow up," she responded very clearly. I was surprised to see passion reflected in her small features. I suddenly didn't have a doubt in my mind that if this child wanted to be a tomato one day, she'd find a way to make that happen.

I'm fairly certain that time will guide her to other goals, but my point in all this is that you should pursue what makes you happy. Before me, I see

our next generation. Among you are the book-smart (the scholars who took, and aced, a million APs), the athletic (those who gave 110% on the field, in a pool, on the track), the talented (all the artists, dancers, musicians, and those who are proficient in a trade) and the street-smart (those who have learned how to thrive in most difficult of circumstances). All of you are about to take your first step into the real world, as a high school graduate. Some of you will shortly be stepping back into the education system to go to college, while others may go directly into the workforce, take time off to think, or do any number of the endless options that lie before you.

Still, no matter who you are or what your “next step” is, I urge you to never let go of your dreams. Whether you want to be rich, famous, successful, loved, or a tomato, don’t let anyone tell you that your future is ridiculous. You’ll have to work hard, and you may have days that seem hopeless, but ultimately if you want it badly enough, you hold the power to bring your dream of a brighter future to fruition.

Class of 2013, I wish you the very best of luck in all you do.  
Congratulations!

## **Huntington High School's 152<sup>nd</sup> Commencement**

### **Class President Stephanie Rafuse's Address**

Thank you, John. A very big thank you on behalf of the Class of 2013 to our class advisors, Lauren Desiderio and Donna Nugent. We appreciate the time and effort you've given to us over the past four years. In addition, thank you Dr. Leonardi, Mr. Cusack, Mr. Polansky and all the administrative assistants for your support.

At the conclusion of each year, the graduating class leaves behind a gift to the school. This year, we are proud to present two water filtration systems that will provide clean filtered water to students and staff.

Congratulations Class of 2013. Good luck in all of your future endeavors.

## **Huntington High School's 152<sup>nd</sup> Commencement**

### **Collin Richardson's Introduction of Superintendent James W. Polansky**

Thank you, reverend.

I have timed my speech to be about 25 minutes, so let's get through this.

Congratulations to the class of 2013, and hello to our families, friends, teachers and other notables. Before I begin, I would like to give a quick shout-out to sidewalks, for keeping us all off the streets.

When I was told by Dr. Leonardi that Superintendent Polansky had requested that I introduce him at graduation, I was literally speechless, a phenomenon I have never before experienced. Of course, I was honored, and I feel that this is a fitting way to show my appreciation for all the encouragement he has given me. But I will stop tooting my own horn and tell you a little bit about our Superintendent.

James W. Polansky has received degrees from Hofstra University, SUNY Albany, and Stony Brook University, where he is currently studying to achieve his doctorate in education.

Mr. Polansky came to Huntington two years ago via Syosset High School where he served as a science teacher and coach, the Oyster Bay-East Norwich School District as the director of science, and the South Huntington School District



as the assistant principal, then as the principal, and eventually as the assistant superintendent.

He is also the proud father of a 17 year old son, a 14 year old daughter and two 6 year old boxers. This seems a little young for contact sports but start them early, I say.

I think we can all agree that Mr. Polansky is a very busy and dedicated man. He is present at almost every performance, athletic event, and academic function of the district schools. He is even seen around our halls on a regular basis, offering a firm handshake to students and teachers alike. He works tirelessly to improve our district and with his incalculable support and interest, inspires Blue Devil pride in each of us.

Thank you, Mr. Polansky, for being the beacon of hope and the bringer of good change at Huntington. It has been a true pleasure to have you as my Superintendent.

I recently shared this quote with a *Super* Teacher, Mr. McKee. I think it is also appropriate for Mr. Polansky, our *Super* Intendant. It reads thus:

"You will give the people an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you. They will stumble, they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders."

Now please join me in welcoming Superintendent Polansky!



# **Huntington High School's 151<sup>st</sup> Commencement**

## **School Board President Emily Rogan's Address**

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.

Indifferent? Self-serving? Indulged? No way. Not you.

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.