

Huntington High School's 159th Commencement

Salutatorian Julien Rentsch's Address

I would like to start by thanking Mrs. Hebert and the Board of Education, Superintendent Mr. Polansky, Assistant Superintendents Ms. McCoy and Ms. Acker, our Principal Mr. Cusack, Assistant Principals Mr. Smith and Dr. Lora, Deans Mr. Gilmor, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Caleca and the rest of our faculty and staff, as well as the custodians and support staff. I would also like to thank the Huntington parents and families, as well as all of my fellow students, for providing such a welcoming community that I am grateful to be a part of. And lastly, I want to personally thank my family and friends, because I would not be standing here today without all of you.

In the words of Nelson Mandela, "The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." With that, we must remember that this moment, our graduation, is a culmination of the last twelve years of our lives, and not just the past few crazy months. But for a minute I want to focus on the last four years; high school.

We've all had so many experiences throughout high school that have shaped us into who we are. As someone who will be pursuing music, I like to think of my high school experience as one giant symphony that has been continuously playing until this moment. Freshman year was the first movement of the symphony, which is the allegro, or fast movement. As freshmen, we rushed through the halls, trying to find our lockers and fit in with the crowd, while simultaneously trying to avoid the feared "Freshman Friday." Then came the second movement of the symphony,

the adagio movement, which is much slower: sophomore year. As sophomores, we finally settled into high school, gradually joined more clubs, and became more involved. We weren't quite as stressed as the juniors, but that soon changed. Before we knew it, we **were** the juniors of Huntington High School, and the third movement, the scherzo, the energetic movement, had begun. We were all frenzied to take our standardized tests, get our grades up, and figure out where we want to go to college and what we want to do with the rest of our lives. But, if you're like me, you procrastinated until senior year to figure all that college stuff out. Or, if you're even more like me, you submitted some of your college applications at 11:59 p.m. on the days they were due.

Anyway, that brings us to senior year: the fourth movement of the symphony, the big finale. What a crazy senior year it's been. I'm sure we all thought it was going to be completely different; hanging out with friends, being "second semester seniors," etc. And we missed out on that. But this whole situation has had some good come with it. We gained perseverance and companionship that will guide us through future endeavors. And, despite all adversity, the first half of senior year actually had some pretty great aspects. We were the class that had the first ever bonfire, we got to hear Chris Mav on the announcements every morning butchering whether it's a sports or fitness day, and we were the class that had All-American track stars, All-State musicians, National History Day winners, Science Olympiad winners, and so many more accomplished people.

Now, as our symphony comes to an end, so do our days as high school students. It's a melancholy feeling, to have the rest of our lives ahead of us, but also having to leave behind teachers and friends we've grown up with. I'm excited for the future, and yet I will still miss coming to school every morning and seeing all of

you. But if there's one thing I am certain about Huntington, it's that we will always be one big Blue Devil Family.

Before I go, I just want to say how thankful I am to be a part of **this** Class of 2020. I am thankful to be a part of a class that isn't afraid to speak up, a class that stands up to injustice, a class that bands together through tough times and laughs through happy times, and a class that always has each other's backs. You have all made a lasting imprint on me, and I hope to have done the same for many of you.

I wish everyone the best of luck in the future, and I cannot wait to see where we all are in years to come. Thank you.

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Valedictorian Andrew Knowles' Address

Thank you Ryan, for everything you said and didn't say.

First, I'd like to once again thank Mrs. Hebert and the Board of Education, Superintendent Polansky and Assistant Superintendents Ms. McCoy and Ms. Acker, our Principal Mr. Cusack, Assistant Principals Mr. Smith and Dr. Lora, Deans Mr. Caleca, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Gilmor, faculty and staff, custodial and support staff, and all of you; parents, family members, fellow students. I also want to thank my family, without whom I would not be here, especially my mom, for convincing me that 95s weren't high enough.

To the class of 2020: Congratulations! We're finally graduating! After today, we'll never have to hear another "2020 vision" joke again, and it feels good. We've had a pretty exciting few years at Huntington, and lots of fun memories as well-- from winning floats to successful sports seasons, Broadway-caliber performances and academic achievements, the class of 2020 can look back at our legacy with pride.

Anyway, that's all in the past now, as we're about to graduate and leave our old lives behind to enter the "real world." The place for which we've been preparing our entire lives, the land of college, adulthood, freedom, and plenty of practical uses for trigonometry (or so we've been told). It feels like now that we're done with high school, we're prepared to take on any challenge... or so I thought.

A little over a year ago, I went through Huntington's driver education program. When I passed my road test, I felt that I was completely prepared for the road, and for the most part, that seemed to be true. I could use a GPS to get to a friend's house, and I could drive to the high school and back every day. I felt comfortable, but one day, I had to drive to an event that was farther away than I would usually drive. Ready to put my Google Maps skills to the test, I left right on time. Immediately after leaving Huntington and entering uncharted territory, my phone lost all signal, and I had no idea what to do. It was a very uncomfortable moment. Even with my months of training and the tiny card in my wallet that said I knew how to drive, I was helpless; I had to figure it out on my own without technology (my worst nightmare). But I drove around, and eventually, I found a Stop and Shop that had free Wi-Fi in the parking lot, and I found my way.

The truth is, none of us is completely prepared. We've been lucky to have such incredibly talented and caring teachers and administrators here at Huntington, but there's no way they could prepare us for *everything*. There will always be unexpected challenges that arise. Look at the pandemic we've been experiencing. I think most of us went into this with no idea what we were doing. But, in that first week, Mr. Polansky, Mr. Cusack, the entire staff came together to figure out how to provide online learning. We even figured out how to exercise online for phys-ed. The "real world" can be scary, and it's tempting to want to stay in our comfort zone. But the "real world" also holds excitement. The risk of failure is exciting. If we hadn't tried new things at the risk of failure, we wouldn't have had the incredibly fun and successful homecoming bonfire this year, or the friendly competition of the "Deck the Halls" event. I'm sure many of us have felt intimidated at trying out for a team or joining a club. Sometimes we fail, but

sometimes we succeed, but during the process, we end up with lifelong memories and relationships.

Huntington might not have taught us everything we need to know, but it has taught us how to learn. We will all encounter failure at some point in our futures, but by learning and growing from these failures, the “real world” becomes a little less intimidating. Remember that even if it feels difficult to recover from failure, or a challenge seems too difficult to take on alone, we will always have Huntington friends and family to support us.

Thank you.

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School Board President Jennifer Hebert's Address

“Life is what happens to you while you're busy making plans.”

This Reader's Digest quote was made famous by John Lennon when he used it as a song lyric. It's always been a favorite of mine but it's never seemed more pertinent than it does right now.

I'm quite certain that all of you spent your high school years making plans – plans to do well in school, plans to make that team or lead that club, plans to find a career or go to college.

And now you're learning first hand that some of the best laid plans, despite all our best efforts, can go astray.

So I'm here, on your graduation day, to remind you to keep focused on what's important to you, so you can live your best life. Your best life, not someone else's definition of what that is.

I recently learned from a book I was reading that the Greek root of the word “crisis” means “to sift.” My advice to you is to take the opportunity this crisis has presented you and sift out what is extraneous, negative and even detrimental in your life. What you'll be left with will be your own personal tools for achieving success.

Maybe success to you means becoming a nurse and working with people in their darkest hours. Or maybe it means becoming an auto mechanic because

you've always been obsessed with cars. Maybe your best life is being a teacher in an inner city school because although the pay is lousy and the job is tough, the rewards of helping kids are more than enough. Maybe your best life is working as a chef, because you're happiest when you're in the kitchen, feeding people.

Or maybe your definition of success is to live in a town you love with your amazing family, to be part of the very greatest community of people on earth, where you run a nursery school and spend nine incredible years representing the remarkable, unparalleled students of the Huntington School District.

To all of you, no matter what your definition of success is, I say “Go, Live Your Best Life.” On behalf of the Huntington Board of Education, I offer our heartfelt “Congratulations” to the Class of 2020.

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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 2020. If I am to be perfectly honest, it's hard to even know where to begin. At the start of this school year, I had already begun planning what I might like to say to you in your final moments as students of Huntington High School. Actually, I started to think about that way back when you entered as freshmen, unsure of what to expect. Back then, when we greeted you for the first time, my goal was to try to calm any uneasiness you might have about your transition to a new building and a new chapter in life.

Now, as you approach yet another milestone, I'd very much like to do the same, but in these uncertain times, it's a challenge to know just how to do that. In fact, I'm not sure it's entirely possible to alleviate all of the concerns and fears you might be facing with just a few words of encouragement right now. Instead, it occurs to me that yes, as soon to be graduates, you do face challenges and uncertainty ahead, but in the context of the world right now, that somehow feels as if it's been turned on its head, we are all feeling anxious and uncertain.

It occurs to me that, as I've seen firsthand how you have handled these last few months with poise and grace, you are the ones who are in the best position to provide us all with a great deal of comfort. Perhaps without even knowing it, you are already leading the way to a better future. You and your generation as a whole already have many of the answers within you. We have seen how you adjusted to new ways of learning, interacting and functioning in society. We have seen your

efforts for change in the face of racism and injustice. We have seen your ability to adapt and grow within these days of historic challenge. And it comforts us. It calms me to see that you all have many of the tools required and the fortitude to go forward and make things better than they are now. That is not to say that these days have not provided you with many moments of stress, upset, loneliness and confusion. I have no doubt that you may very well have experienced these, as many of us have. But as we look ahead to better days, it is becoming clearer to me that each of you is truly worthy of the moniker we've often placed upon you as the class of 2020, a "class with perfect vision." It is this vision of yours that will help to guide us all through the future. It will be your ability to truly see beyond the darkness that will help us all to find the light. And the way you will do it is by sticking together. Collaboration, ingenuity, synergy, hope, empathy and determination. These are the qualities and skills I have seen emerge from so many of you over these past four years. I have no doubt that these will serve you well as you lead the way to new levels of peace and prosperity.

Class of 2020, Blue Devils, may you be blessed as you go forth and may you always remember the fond memories made here at Huntington High School. I wish you the most heartfelt congratulations on this very important evening.

Thank you.

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Superintendent James W. Polansky's Address

Good evening all and thank you for joining on this somewhat unprecedented occasion during which we will honor a group that really needs no introduction.

To the Huntington High School Class of 2020:

Let me begin by saying that if I could hit the restart button on 2020, I would do it in a heartbeat. And let me continue by reminding you how much we love and adore you.

I met so many of you back in 2011 as eager, bright-eyed primary schoolers who had so much more to learn and so much growth in store. To be honest, I remember some of that more than what happened just this morning. Fast forward, however, to the brilliant, charismatic, humble and caring young adults that you've become!

You will be remembered for it all, but most certainly for the incredible fortitude you have demonstrated during the past few months. In brief, you have endured a global pandemic; yes, a global pandemic. Through it, your patience, hope and resilience have been shining lights. In recent weeks, you have witnessed national events that unfortunately reek of racism and bias. In response, your voices have been loud and constructive and your desire for social justice has been clear.

As we gather here this evening, I'll add that I am sorry. I'm so sorry that the traditions you've been looking forward to for years – award ceremonies,

prom, spring concerts, the spring athletic season, commencement, and just being a high school senior for the final few months of your 12th grade year – have been ripped from your grasp. When the torch was passed at last year’s graduation ceremony, I know that many of you who were present were thinking, “Next year, next year this will be us!”

Schools are doing their best to be creative, but understand that I sympathize with you when your hearts cry out, “It’s not the same.” You’re right. It’s not the same. While some of us have been agonizing over the postponement of things, you’ve been mourning lost moments, milestones, and memories, caused by events well beyond your control.

Allow me to be the first, near the first or somewhere in the middle (but not the last) to tell you that you WILL come out on the other side, and what a story you’ll have to tell. It is upsetting, I know, and all the feelings of frustration and disappointment over the last several months have been warranted. No need to hide them.

Here’s what else I know: you are some of the most accepting, driven and innovative students whom I have had the pleasure to watch in action and from whom I have had the privilege to learn. During the period of school closure alone, you have been using technology and media to raise your voices and share your ideas. You’ve responded with tremendous thought to world events. You’ve survived online Advanced Placement exams despite the College Board’s lack of preparation. You’ve survived without Regents exams this year – and I promise that a “no-Regents June” won’t have any ill effect on your future.

Sadly, I’ve had the chance to see only a few of your smiling faces in recent

weeks. But from all that I've seen and heard, it is clear that your positivity has been contagious. If any of you remember Act 2, Scene 3 of "Romeo and Juliet" (and I am sure it is the first thing that comes to mind right now), Friar Lawrence utters to himself that, "Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied, and vice sometimes by action dignified." This captures something that characterizes your class - you take things that are wrong and make them into something better or genuinely right.

You have the knack for making the best of bad situations. You have risen to the occasion and shown that your bravery outshines any doubts you have about yourselves and others. You are uniquely set up to handle every curveball that life can throw at you, regardless of its magnitude, with creativity and grace.

It's unfair that you are entering the next stage of your lives at such an unsettling time and in a world filled with uncertainty. But we believe in your ability to move through this time and/or any other like it. Don't underestimate your resolve or your ability to find the good in any situation.

When you look back on this time, I hope that you'll take great pride in how you moved forward with respect for each other and the world around you. Because, really, that's what ceremonies and rituals – those that you may think you're missing – are all about. They are expressions of love, affection and gratitude. You have laughed, cried, and learned with each other for years. You've sweated in classrooms during projects and exams, celebrated your successes, supported each other when things did not go as planned or hoped, and have made it through all sorts of adolescent drama.

Traditions and rituals can be powerful, sure, but now, you will decide how

to celebrate. You don't need to change what's in your hearts, you just need to rethink how you'll share it. I know you will look through the muck and mire of a coronavirus-altered scenario and still be able to give each other the support and encouragement for what comes next. And I'm already inspired by it.

Finally, I want to say thank you. Thank you for being an awesome group of individuals who were never shy about expressing yourselves and pursuing your passions. We will always be grateful and you will always be the Huntington High School Class of 2020 – one who experienced something that no other class experienced before you. We are more than excited to see where you'll go and what you'll do next. Know that the world is already a better place because you are all in it.

Best wishes and God bless.