

Huntington High School's 160th Commencement

Class of 2021 President Taylor Case's Address

Good evening everyone. My name is Taylor Case, and I am honored to be speaking on behalf of the class of 2021 as the Senior Class President. Thank you for joining us as we celebrate the success and strength of our Seniors.

The disappointments we faced this year were unprecedented. No one expected to spend most of senior year sitting in their bedrooms, interacting with their close peers through a computer screen, and being shielded from normalcy behind masks and dividers.

However, instead of focusing on past regrets and what we may have missed, we must focus on how lucky we are to be gathered here today as an entire class to recognize our persistence and celebrate our achievements.

As a class, we have come together to learn many things. We have learned to value every stage that life has to offer because you never truly know what the future has in store. We have learned to make the most of a situation that many would deem "hopeless" by maintaining normalcy with what we were given. Most of all, we learned to appreciate school a little extra than we usually do. Up until this year, it would be nearly impossible to imagine not spending our final time as a Huntington Blue Devil walking the halls with our best friends, spending free periods hanging out with our favorite teachers, and gathering at the best locker hang-out spots.

Covid has taught us to value our relationships with our peers and staff members, to enjoy each day we get to spend in a classroom environment,

and to soak up every aspect of the quintessential high school experience, both the good and the bad, because you never know what an amazing experience you've been offered until its gone.

On behalf of our senior class, I would like to give a huge thank you to Mrs. Jordan Schessler and Mrs. Amelia Saggese, who was not able to attend today. These two teachers have worked tirelessly as our class advisors throughout the years, and I, as well as many others, have been fortunate enough to receive their guidance in navigating through high school, inspiring school spirit, and representing our grade with pride.

Although a large portion of our funds raised over the past four years were put directly into planning our amazing prom for our seniors, the class of 2021 still wanted to use the remaining money to give back to the hardworking classes below us. Speaking on behalf of many of students who have been a part of fundraising, we know the struggles of coming up with clever and fun ways to raise money, especially during a pandemic. Therefore, the remains of our funds will be gifted back to the rising junior and senior classes to help offset the costs of their banquet and prom.

Once again, I would like to give a huge thank you to Huntington High School for bringing us together, creating life-long friendships, and providing a place we can call home for years to come. I wish the best of luck to everyone with all the exciting new places life takes them, but always remember; there's no place like home. Thank you!

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Co-Valedictorian Alex Bellissimo's Address

I would like to start by thanking my family, Miranda, Christian, my mom, and my dad, for helping me get through every step of the way.

I would also like to congratulate Grace, as I am honored to receive and share this recognition with her. It's funny that we actually went to preschool together, and now here we are.

I was once told that when you first start high school, the next four years will fly by. Standing here in front of everyone today, I know that, in fact, this is true. But despite this, I couldn't have asked for a better high school experience. We went from not being able to find our classes as freshmen, walking in late, and being scared that we would get in trouble. To knowing exactly where we were going and well, still walking in late as seniors. Huntington has offered many opportunities for us to challenge ourselves, whether it was in the classroom, on the field, or on stage. Through these challenges, we have been given the chance to find our place and our passions.

Although entering senior year in a global pandemic certainly wasn't ideal, there were so many positives that came out of it. We made the best of it, and I don't think I would've traded this year in for any other. The Huntington administration, teachers, and staff did a phenomenal job making this year feel as normal as possible for us, from going back to school every day to being able to play sports and participate in extracurriculars to bringing back field day and prom.

Actually, they didn't make this year feel normal, they made it normal. For us to get through school and life in this way makes me excited for what's to come in the future for all of us. We learned how to be resilient when situations are less than ideal, which will help us to succeed.

My dad's favorite quote was always, "It is what it is." I want everyone to think about this quote and what it means, as I think it can mean a lot to us as we move forward in our lives. Everyone has their failures, but it is what we do with our failures that will determine our success. I learn from every mistake, from every challenge that comes my way, and look for ways to make the future better, while it is still in my control. There is no reason to worry about wrongdoings from the past, as the past cannot be changed.

As I leave you all with these thoughts, I would like to end by saying that I've never met a more talented, fun, and hardworking group of people than the Class of 2021. We've gone through so much together, and we've come out on top! I am so glad to be a part of it, and I can't wait to see all of the great accomplishments that our futures hold. Thank you for the best four years, and good luck to all as we embark on a new journey.

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Co-Valedictorian Grace Wildermuth's Address

Thanks Gabe. Now I'm going to ask Alex to help me thank everyone who has made this year possible.

On behalf of the class of 2021, we thank Mrs. Biernacki and the Board of Education, our district Superintendent—Mr. Polansky, and our Assistant superintendents—Dr. Acker and Mrs. McCoy.

We'd also like to thank our principal, Mr. Cusack, our assistant principals, Dr. Lors and Mr. Smith, our Ddans, Mr. Caleca, Mr. Gilmor and Mr. Wilson, and our faculty and staff

We extend a special thank you to our nurse— Mrs. Amaranti, who has kept us healthy, and our custodians and groundspeople, who have kept the building safe and clean this year. We appreciate all of your extra effort.

We would also like to thank our class advisors, who have put in so much work towards making our senior year special. Thank you to Mrs. Schessler and Mrs. Saggese, who could not be here today.

Before I start, I'd like to thank my parents, and my brother, Matthew, for listening to all my school stresses and nerdy rambling about books and my favorite bands. Your wisdom, unconditional support, and—let's face it—good genes are the

reason I'm here. I'd like to extend that thank you to the other parents and families of the graduates as well. Your encouragement and help does not go unnoticed.

Folks, we've made it! Congratulations to the Class of 2021! I'm going to be honest, we've made it through more than the typical graduating class. It's not often that high schoolers have to deal with a global health crisis on top of the stresses of a normal teenage life. Between school being suspended indefinitely in our junior year, and being online in our senior year, I think everyone should be proud of the academic and personal hurdles that you have had to jump over to get to this stadium.

I think the big question at most graduations, or any major pivot point in your life, is "what's next?" For 13 years, our paths at school have been highly structured. Our parents decided where we would live and what district we would go to. We spend most of our time at school or doing school work.

After graduating high school, it's the complete opposite: what we do and how we act is up to us. We choose if we want to work or join the military or continue our education. We choose where we live, what we study, and which career we pursue. After 13 years of structure, this much freedom of choice is overwhelming.

I'm sure I'm not the only one that this happens to, but at every family gathering I go to, I get questions about my plans for college. And I know I love music and books and learning, but I have no idea how that translates into plans for my future so the question of "what's next?" is always in the back of my head.

If you ask me, I'm not qualified to give advice for the next stage of life at all. Good test scores do not always translate into broad understanding or life wisdom, and I am just as confused as the rest of you are.

Despite my fears about "what's next?," I do have confidence that our class in particular is equipped to handle the unknown. Nothing says, "what's next?" like waiting every two weeks at the end of junior year to see when we would be going back to school. Nothing says "uncertainty" like questioning whether we would have a prom, sports seasons, or spring concerts. I think it's safe to say we are experts in dealing with change, doubt, and anxiety, which is a skill that will stick with us long past high school.

Compared to the constant change we've faced these past two years, graduating seems a lot less frightening. And unlike changes due to COVID, graduation is a purely positive thing! We're here to celebrate our successes and look forward to new opportunities as we get older. We have the power to make a positive impact on our families, friends, and communities. Alongside the confusion and doubt, the question "what next?" should also produce excitement and optimism. As you walk across the stage, I hope you embrace the countless possibilities in the unknown with the confidence that you have made it through so much to get here. Thank you, and congratulations again!

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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 2021. Do you ever just stop for a moment, look around and say to yourself, "Well... how did I get here?" Have you ever just kind of traced back the long and short term events leading up to the very moment you are currently in and paused to think about it for a minute? I'm having that kind of moment right now, and maybe some of you are too. How on Earth did we get here, in this place, all together, celebrating like this?

It is no mystery that we all had many steps and quite a journey to get here. And you, our soon-to-be graduates, have certainly had many mountains to climb, many seas to cross to get to this moment. And now, we can collectively pause, reflect on the path leading to the present and breathe knowing that we are really here... we are finally really here together. And that is truly a beautiful thing.

So the question comes to mind, what is most important for us as we face challenges big and small, as many of you have over time? What can be learned from all of this that we have experienced and what might you take with you as you confront new situations and challenges along your next steps? I know it's very easy and quite cliché to say that there's always a silver lining in each situation or to remember that in every challenge or disappointment there is a lesson. But I really am a true believer that no matter what happens, we must always try to find the good, even in the difficult times, hard as it may be.

So I think there are many lessons that can be taken from the experiences of the last couple of years and beyond that will help in the years to come. But to me,

the most important thing, the one thing that has helped me most both personally and professionally, is to remember that no matter the situation, you always have the power to control what I refer to as the you inside of you. In order to illustrate this, I need to talk for a moment about turtles.

I think we all know how turtles behave. They duck inside their shells when they feel frightened or threatened and they pop back out to eat, walk around or get some sun. There's nothing particularly instructive about that for us, really, they're turtles... that's what they do and what does that really have to do with us? The turtle however can be a source of inspiration for us especially when facing challenges. Did you know that the average turtle shell can withstand thousands of pounds of pressure? But they don't start off that way, of course. It takes time for a turtle's shell to harden to the point where it can effectively protect a turtle. We are similar in many ways. People learn to protect themselves from both physical and emotional harm, but it takes time and experience. It takes practice and patience to know when to retreat into our shells and when to emerge, showing our true selves to others. The beauty of this, though, is not that we have the ability to emerge or retreat, to hide or come forth, but that we get to choose when and how to do so. We get to decide what we reveal and what we protect. And we get to be the ones who create our own environments inside our shells if we need to go there. With this understanding should come a sense of calm. To know that we can always be in control can be comforting to not only ourselves but also to others.

I'm not suggesting in any way that we should run and hide when things get difficult, but rather, when challenges arise, when storms rage around us, we should take comfort in the knowledge that we can always be safe inside ourselves. We are protected. We have the ability to retreat, regroup, recover and reemerge ready to take on any situation. There is strength in this ability and it can help others as well.

When you have truly practiced the art of being in control during times of adversity and hardship, when you can really experience calm within the storm, others will sense this and be comforted as well. This is how we help one another, and this is what will make you a leader among others.

So basically, as you are about to graduate high school and move on to new and exciting experiences, I'm asking you to be a bunch of turtles. I happen to think there's nothing cuter than a turtle basking in the sun, stretching outside of its shell, smiling up to the heavens on a little rock in the middle of a pond. Not everyone thinks so, perhaps, but no one can object to the idea that turtles are calm, wise, confident and at peace. Blue Devils, as you go forth, be like the turtle and may your every measured step take you inch by inch toward your goals, your happiness and your sense of inner peace so you may be a radiant leader for others to follow.

Class of 2021, 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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Superintendent James W. Polansky's Address

Good evening and welcome to our students, trustees, faculty, staff and guests. We have reached the end of a very long year ... 15+ months really. It's been a time of incomparable hardship and confusion locally and well beyond. We have faced a global pandemic, social unrest, debates pitting public health against education, sensationalistic and often undependable media reporting, and a blurring (no, a complete eradication) of the lines between politics and just about everything else.

[Speaking to the Class of 2021 ...]

Among the few constants during this period ... the fortitude and determination demonstrated by members of Huntington High School's Class of 2021. As I shared in my message to families yesterday, I wish we could keep you here indefinitely, but that would deny the rest of the world of what you will bring to it. Your collective character and perennial optimism were consistent beacons of hope. Since last spring, there have been fear and loss experienced by many. This may very well have been the most difficult stretch that you have experienced in your young lifetimes. You have been reminded continuously of what you have missed. I implore you, however, to remember what you have accomplished, what you now know you can accomplish, and your ability to bounce back even stronger as individuals and as members of society. You are resilient and do not shortchange what you have learned!

You have gained a greater sense of the power of technology. In fact, this power may have changed the world of school and work as we know it. The way we have made and maintained digital connections since last spring

are nothing short of extraordinary. Regardless, I hope you have also recognized the tremendous value in face-to-face connections. It is how society was built and can never, ever be replaced.

I know you have learned to scrutinize what is portrayed in the media, particularly that of the social variety. Some of what you see and hear may be real, some of it may be slanted, and some of it may be altogether untrue. You leave Huntington High School fully aware of the need to do your own research and to avoid taking anything at face value. I hope you have also learned that feeding any frenzy on Facebook does not solve a problem and the cloak of anonymity is not something behind which to hide.

You continue to model kindness and respect. You understand that small acts and first impressions can go a long way. Interested in an example? I'll give you one that I, personally, have never forgotten and one that is directly connected to this class. Early in my Huntington superintendency ... I believe this group was in second grade at the time ... I was making my way through one of our primary schools. I walked into a second grade classroom that had just completed a reading lesson. The students were making their own decorative bookmarks. Those in the classroom on that day could not wait to share their creations. I, of course, marveled at them like a proud parent. I'll not soon forget when one little munchkin came toward me, so pleased to have brought a smile to someone's face with her creativity, and insisted that I become the new owner of her bookmark. Through the years, she has asked me on several occasions if I still have it. Guess what? I still do and it is among my most prized Huntington possessions, as it helped me realize early on that I would make a home here. Further, it truly represents what our community has been all about. Yes, she is sitting in the field today. I won't embarrass her, but she should know ... all of you should know what a

difference you have made with your compassionate gestures, even those that may have seemed insignificant at the time.

We live in a time when opinions seem to take center stage and they are not all the same. And that's OK because you recognize the incredible importance of true listening and empathy ... respectively, a skill and a quality that will take you to great places in life. You have never failed to see the value in what others have to offer nor have you hesitated to place the needs of others before your own. As you move into the next stages of your lives, keep these words from Winston Churchill in your conscious thoughts ... "We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give."

Take pride in your accomplishments during your years in Huntington. While you won't soon forget the uncertainty and apprehension that marred the past year, you should remain proud of your ability to adapt and work through it. From being in school once or twice each week to returning full time, re-engaging in-person, getting back to what you love ... whether it be your participation in a club, mentoring your peers, providing a service to the community, performing in a drama or musical, or winning a County baseball championship. The spirit has returned.

It has been said that there are several things you can't recover in life ...

- 1) A word after it's said
- 2) An opportunity after it's missed
- 3) Trust after it's lost
- 4) Time after it's gone.

With these things in mind, please, please never waste time arguing, remain humble and kind, and embrace every moment you have with those you love.

Know that we will always love you and that Huntington will forever be your home.

Good luck and God bless.