

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.

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Class President Zachary Burden's Address

I would like to begin by thanking Dr. Leonardi, Mr. Cusack, Mr. Polansky and the Board of Education for all of your support. We could not have done this without you. To the teachers and parents, thank you for helping to guide us along our paths of growing up. Thank you to my other student government officers for being so amazing. A big thank you to Ms. Lombardi and Ms. Colica, for being the Class of 2014's advisors, throughout the past four years, helping make all of our class events happen and helping us to "dance" through our experience at the high school. Also, thank you to those who helped to make today's graduation possible! To the Class of 2014 sitting beside me: congratulations on making it to this point. I am so happy to have had this experience in Huntington with all of you.

As the President of the Class of 2014, it is now my duty to present Huntington High School with the senior class gift. The Rock has become a symbol of Huntington High School. For many, many years it's been a place where students congregate and show spirit. But, at nighttime it is a little dark around The Rock, so the Class of 2014 has decided to put two lamp posts around The Rock to help give light around such an important piece of Huntington. These lamp posts will also be inscribed with the names of Ray Vega, graduate of the Class of 2013 and Carmen Rivera-Gotay, a member of the Class of 2014, whose spirit is with us today and is graduating with us in all of our hearts. They will always be there to be a light in the dark, to remind us that even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise, and that there will always be a light at the end of the tunnel.

Huntington's Alma Mater, or at least the one listed on Wikipedia, speaks the words "Now that our tasks are done. We will remember the days we spent within thine halls, And even though we now must part, Loyal in every heart, O ye of Huntington, We will be true." Now some of you might be thinking "We have an Alma Mater?" and the truth is I didn't know that we had one either, but these words speak very true. As our last moments as students of Huntington High School come to an end, we must keep all of our memories of Huntington in our hearts as we leap into the next chapter of our lives.

From asking people to play on the playground in elementary school to asking people to prom in high school, our memories vary from person to person

throughout the years. We all had a journey leading up to the high school that was different at the 4 four different elementary schools, to Woodhull Intermediate and Huntington Intermediate (or as it is now known as Jack Abrams), eventually bringing us all together in Finley and then to the high school. Huntington has found a way to combine every kind of person and find the perfect mix. There really is no place like Huntington.

This grade has given me so many memories to remember forever. Such as homecomings, where we had our beautiful floats such as the freshman year Fruity Pebbles float, or better known as a worm in a box, to this year's inappropriate Eiffel Tower. Though we may have never gotten first place, we always had a good time making them and that's what really counts. Or how about our Play Fests that always were amazing. Even though sadly we were unable to put on our senior Play Fest, we knew it would have come out good. We also put on one of the best proms ever during our junior year and our prom last night, thrown by the juniors, measures up almost as high, so thank you to them. And most recently, the last day of school.

As I started to write this speech, I was thinking of how unified my grade is. I wanted my class to be all together one last time before graduation. I brought up the idea in the Class of 2014 Facebook group, to meet at the turf, where we are today, and watch the sunrise all together. The sun rose over Huntington High School and we watched together, to finish off our year as the Class of 2014. There have been so many games, performances, ceremonies, events, and more as well, where you can find the class of 2014 coming together to be one.

Movies show high school to be very cliquey and show everyone to be different and make high school seem so tough. It shows no one to have anything in common, but I have realized that that is not true at all. We have all experienced triumphs and failures, heartbreaks and love, and for all of the things that we don't have in common, there is the idea of family and Huntington pride that exists in all of us. As many would say "(Hashtag) #BleedBlue."

So to end my speech, I decided to quote a movie that shows ups and downs of high school and how people can really come together, "High School Musical". "Here and now, it's time for celebration. I finally figured out that all our dreams have no limitations and that's what it's all about. Everyone is special in their own way; we make each other strong; we're not the same; we're different in a good way; together is where we belong. We've arrived because we stuck together,

champions one and all. We're all in this together, and when we stand hand in hand, we can make our dreams come true."

We're all in this together Huntington. Once a Blue Devil, always a Blue Devil. Believe in yourselves, dream, try. Do good. Congratulations to the Class of 2014, and the best of luck on all of your futures, I know you will all do extraordinary things.

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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 two Assistant Superintendents, Dr. Card and Mr. Gergis, 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.

At every graduation I invariably think that the class we are honoring is one of the most accomplished and competitive thus far. I have solid proof, however, that this is in fact one of the most successful, accomplished and high achieving class graduating from Huntington High School.

Among the graduates is a finalist in the Intel science competition who placed sixth in the nation, the recipient of the prestigious National Merit Scholarship, a tireless volunteer for Island Harvest, the recipient of a \$20,000 Coca Cola scholarship, a budding astronomer at the Custer Observatory, incredible musicians and singers, talented artists who have been recognized as Long Island best and gifted athletes who will be playing varsity sports in college.

I know that part of the reason for these achievements are due to the opportunities this board of education, superintendent and central office administrators continue to offer in the way of challenging courses, electives and internship's experiences. The commitment of our talented teachers to the success of every single student, and the dedication of you, the parents, who have supported them in all that they have done, has made it possible for these graduates to reach their full potential. The main ingredient to the inordinate success this class has experienced thus far, however, is the talent, the passion and the drive that they put into everything that they have done. They have amazed us with their intelligence, capability and humility. They are competitive yet supportive of one another and sincerely grateful for the opportunities that the Huntington Union Free School District has provided them.

This class above all others has worked to include everyone and to extend a helping hand. Relay for Life, in its third year, generated \$ 132,000 in support of cancer research. Students volunteered through the Community First Aide Squad, Huntington Hospital, The Fire department and the Town of Huntington Youth Court.

Over the last four years, these seniors have challenged themselves with Advanced Placement courses that have the potential of earning them college credits. In fact in their senior year alone, 145 graduates took 456 AP exams. 87 took three AP exams or more with three seniors taking six, nine taking seven, and 23 taking five AP exams.

For this senior class the college center processed 1,733 college applications. As of today the class of 2014 has been offered \$19,047,241 in scholarship money.

College acceptances include several Ivy League schools: Columbia University, Dartmouth College, Cornell, Brown, Yale, Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania as well as all SUNYs , all CUNYs (including the Macaulay Honors College) Bard College, Carnegie Mellon, MIT, the Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, Emory, Fordham , Hofstra, Johns Hopkins, Kenyon College, LIU Post, University of Michigan, Northeastern University, Northwestern University, Notre Dame, Providence, Rice University, Sacred Heart , Syracuse , Villanova, and College of William and Mary.

Some of the interesting majors they have selected include: exercise science, mathematics, physics, astronomy, music, fine arts, photography, engineering, fashion merchandising, education, psychology, business, accounting, nursing, physician's assistant, criminal justice, health education, molecular genetics, theater arts, jazz studies, musical theater, aviation management, history, game art and design, environmental science.

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

And now a final thought for our candidates. As you pursue your dreams and expand your experiences, remember that "The secret of change is to focus all your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new." (Socrates)

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

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Superintendent James W. Polansky's Address

We have assembled here this evening to witness these commencement exercises and to honor these fine young men and women for their academic and personal growth and achievement. I have said repeatedly throughout this year, this is an outstanding group of young people.

I am not going to profess that after nearly five decades on this Earth and twenty-five years in education, I know it all. No one knows it all despite what my own son or daughter may tell you. Nonetheless it gives me pleasure to share some of the valuable things I've learned through the years about life from the important people in mine.

Although it may have sometimes seemed it, life is not about what outfit you wore on a particular day, your score on a particular exam, or how many goals you scores in a particular game. These are representative of the myriad details we consume ourselves with daily. The one shirt, grade or goal should contribute little to your sense of personal worth.

Life is not about sweating the small stuff. We often allow ourselves to get worked up about things that, upon closer examination, aren't really that big a deal. Make peace with imperfection.

Life is not about holding grudges. Grudges are for those who insist that they are owed something; forgiveness, however, is for those who are wise enough to move on.

Life is not defined by grouches. Keep cheerful friends. The grouches pull you down. Do your best to maintain a positive outlook, even in challenging times.

Life is not defined by guilt trips. Take a trip to the village, the city, a foreign country, but not to where the guilt is.

Life is not defined by non-essential numbers. For example, age is simply a frame of mind and we can do nothing about the price of gas.

Life is not about what others have that you don't. It's all about what you have and what's important to you and yours.

Life is not about conformity. Don't necessarily dare to be different, but dare to be yourself. If that doesn't make you different, then something is wrong.

Life is not about appearances. An old Scottish proverb makes it very clear that a rich heart may be under a poor coat.

Life is not about being afraid. Own up to your fears and conquer them in productive fashion.

Life is not about making millions. Follow your passion and not the money. The experiences and satisfaction that money produces can be very short lived.

This quote is attributed to many, not sure who was the originator ... "life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away."

Then what should life be about?

It's about loving and finding special people with whom to share the grand moments, as well the everyday experiences. Surround yourself with whom and what you love.

Life is about learning. Learn more about technology, to play the guitar, gardening, or whatever. Don't let your brain idle. Don't ever minimize the value of your education and your aspirations to take it further.

Life is about gaining experience and learning from mistakes. At one point or another, you are probably going to do something stupid. Deal with it, own up to it and make amends if you need to.

Life is about simple things. An overstuffed sandwich, a good joke, a weekend nap - my own personal examples of life's pleasures. Find yours.

Life is about cherishing your health. If it is good, preserve it. If it is not, improve it. If it is beyond what you can improve, seek help.

Life is about laughing and crying. Laugh often, long and loud. Tears happen; it is best to simply let them flow. There will be countless occurrences throughout your life where you will have the chance to laugh and/or cry. In fact, some of us have done both countless times this week alone.

Life is about embracing differences. Based on my experiences with these young people, this is something that they have been doing throughout their lives.

Life is about leaving a place or situation better than you found it. Members of the Class of 2014 have collectively done just that for the Huntington school community.

Life is about fulfilling your dreams. If you can dream it, you can live it as long as you're willing to work hard enough.

Students, please recognize that as of today, you have successfully climbed but a few bottom rungs on a metaphorical ladder. I can say with confidence that you are more than ready to continue ascending. You have achieved academically, athletically, musically, and otherwise, but more importantly, you have grown as individuals and community members. You have developed a sense of admiration and respect for each other, as well as for your school. Your spirit and enthusiasm have been infectious. Now comes the time for you to share your gifts with the world surrounding.

Regardless of where life brings you, take the time to help and serve others even if it slows you down a little. As you continue to explore and develop your unique talents, remain humble. As life hands you challenges, welcome them as ways to become smarter and stronger. As you acquire material things, know that your most important possessions are your honesty, integrity, and desire to make a positive difference.

Lastly, remember that all of you share a very special bond. Regardless of where you go from here, you are and will always be Blue Devils.

May your path take you everywhere you wish to go and bring you an abundance of pleasant surprises! I am proud of each and every one of you. Congratulations and best wishes!

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Salutatorian Marc Feldman's Address

Thank you, Brian for that introduction.

I think it goes without saying that I was pretty happy when I was named this year's Salutatorian. But this was hedged by the fact that I'd ultimately have to give a speech here today. I'll be quite honest, like many, I don't like public speaking (surprising, considering how much I speak otherwise) – I dreaded writing my speech and I dreaded talking before such a large crowd of my peers, their families and friends, and district officials.

As a 17 year old, I'm not so sure I have the capacity to inspire. I haven't lived through *too much* adversity (except I *still* have an iPhone 4 and nobody has a charger), and I haven't done anything *particularly* amazing during my thus-far brief stay on Earth (although I *have* beaten 2048 my fair share of times). I'm still yet to figure out why I'm up here, as any number of us could be speaking in my place.

But, through some series of events, I've ended up here, so here we go: As far as we know, we only have one shot at life. I ask: Why waste it? Why spend our precious, fleeting existence doing things that make us unhappy? Now, given, don't spend your life in such a way as to harm others, but *do* do what makes you happy. Don't waste the time you have here – make your mark, and enjoy yourselves at every step of the way. Don't follow someone else's path, if you don't want it to be

your path. Live, and live for you (especially now, when most of us have few obligations to anyone but ourselves).

But, honestly I think it is best that we take this time to say “thank you” to everyone who has helped us reach this point, and I believe each “thank you” warrants a hearty applause. Thank you to the teachers, for educating and inspiring us on a daily basis. Thank you to the school administrators, for keeping this ship afloat. Thank you to the janitorial staff, for cleaning up the mess we’ve inevitably made. Thank you to the friends, who have made school enjoyable. And, I think most important of all, thank you to the families, who have been with us through every part of the ride.

Really, thank you to all of the parents. However, as we thank our parents, we should remember to be happy with everything we do ourselves. Now this isn’t to say that our parents don’t know best, they are older and wiser than we are. And this isn’t to say that we shouldn’t please our parents, for all they have done, they really do deserve it. But these are our lives to live, and consequently our lives to make decisions in. Believe wholeheartedly in your actions, or do not act.

Be happy. Congratulations Class of 2014!

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Valedictorian Brian Gilbert's Address

If you know anything about me, and I hope you do, then you know that if there are three things I can't stand, they're sexism, traffic lights and misattributed quotations. So when I made my college decision and my dad sent me a sappy text message "quoting" Dante Alighieri's "Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti," meaning "Follow your own path and let the people talk," I was suspicious. It sounds a bit hippy-dippy for Dante, doesn't it? So I took to the internet.

Sure enough it turns out that the quote is actually a paraphrase of Dante penned by the hippy-dippy Karl Marx as a kind of epigraph to his *Das Kapital*. The original Dante quote comes from *Purgatory*: "Vien dietro a me, e lascia dir le genti." "*Follow me* and let the people talk."

It doesn't take an English major (or an Italian major) to see the two quotes express very different ideas. Should we really follow our own path or should we follow the people in charge, the people smarter than us, or the people we love?

I used to think I hated misquotations because they degrade the famous people they're attributed to. But now I realize that's not what bothers me. It's that we don't have enough respect for ourselves to stick to our beliefs *unless* we attribute them to some higher source. Every one of us is capable of deciding what is good and finding meaning in our own lives, even when it's hard.

Dr. Seuss never said "Those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind," but they don't. And Gandhi never said "Be the change you wish to see in the world," but do it anyway. No matter what la genti dicono, what the people say to do, or what they say about what you're doing, if what you're doing is right, then keep doing it, and as Winston Churchill never said, "If you're going through hell, keep going."

But don't follow your own path, for as John Donne did not say exactly, "No person is an island." Follow the path of your fellow human being. Paths of kindness run parallel and if someone blocks yours, do not detour. Let others take advantage of you, if you are strong enough to do so. And if I could write, I'd write a book one day with the epigraph, "Segui il corso giusto, e lascia dir le genti." "Follow the righteous path, and let the people talk," and you can quote me on that.