

Huntington High School's 154th Commencement

School Board President Emily Rogan's Address

Good evening everyone and congratulations to the graduates and their families. I love commencement—it is truly a time for celebration, reflection and of course, anticipation.

Commencement speeches however, can be like parents, full of clichés and platitudes.

You're probably heard them all by now: Find your passion. Do what you love and it won't feel like work. Work hard and play hard. The world depends upon you to make it better...the list goes on and on.

I sometimes think we adults have forgotten what it's like to be 17 and in a time of such incredible upheaval. I know you're excited about graduating and moving on, whether it's to college, the workforce or the military. But on some level too, you must have some anxiety about the unknown.

With that in mind, I offer you a list of 18 things --since that's roughly your age--I want you to know as you graduate. This list originated a few weeks ago when I wrote my son a list of 19 things I wanted him to know on his 19th birthday. When I was finished, I thought, “hmmm, this would be good for my speech.” And so, I've adapted that list for you.

Most of the ideas are original; some I borrowed from others such as the blog Grown and Flown, which I strongly recommend as reading material for anyone parenting an older teenager.

So here's my list, in no particular order:

1. Accept imperfection. Life is messy, disappointing, painful and complicated. Sometimes, in fact a lot of times, things don't work out. And in between there are these great moments of fun, connection, contentment and joy. Get used to it.

2. Learn how to cook some basic things--French toast, pasta, scrambled eggs, steak. You will always benefit from knowing how to cook and it's a great to be able to throw something together when people are hungry.

3. Be kind. I know you know this already, but it bears repeating. Having compassion and kindness—being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes—will serve you well in ALL relationships, both personal and professional.

4. Be a better listener than talker. We're so busy waiting for our turn to talk that we often fail to listen. Listen and validate someone else's opinion, even if yours is different. See what happens when you do.

5. Be grateful, every day, even when you don't feel grateful. You are alive, you are healthy and your cup runneth over with blessings. You just have to remind yourself.

6. There's nothing attractive about getting wasted. Absolutely nothing.

7. Intelligence is the ability to learn. Wisdom is making decisions based on what you know and understand. You can and should have both.

8. Treat your body respectfully. Get enough sleep; eat real, nutritious food, exercise regularly. Don't put too much junk into it. Trust me, older you will thank younger you.

9. Write handwritten thank you notes. It's rare and people will remember that you did.

10. Do what's right, even when it's hard.

11. Be charitable, always. This world needs stewardship and care. You can help.

12. Don't be afraid of your feelings. We raised you in a culture that teaches us to fear feelings and push them away. Honor and accept them instead. It's not a sign of weakness but of tremendous strength.

13. Hug the people you love. Tell them you love them. You'll never regret doing it, but you will regret NOT doing it enough.

14. Work hard at whatever you do. The satisfaction from working hard and finishing a difficult task feels good.

15. Be a person of your word. You will stand out simply because so few people keep their promises. And if you can't keep it, don't make it.

16. Nothing good ever happens after 1 am.

17. Read books that matter. Instagram, Twitter and BuzzFeed are not substitutes for good writing. You will be a better, smarter person if you read.

18. Respect yourself. You are an amazing person who is on a journey of self-discovery. In order to love anyone else fully, you must first honor yourself. Figure out what that means to you.

On behalf of the Board of Education, we wish you all the best as you begin the next chapter of your lives. Congratulations!

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Class President Elizabeth Corao's Address

Good evening everyone. Faculty, administrators, families, and students, it is truly an honor to be able to speak to you here today. More than an honor actually- Considering the number of times I've used the Huntington High School Class of 2015 Facebook group to try and reach most of the students, it's practically my dream come true to be standing here with the mic all to myself.

Webster's dictionary defines "Huntington" as "a male given name; meaning "Hunting Estate." However *Urban Dictionary*, for those of you familiar with the source, gives us a different definition: "Huntington: Best town in Long Island, New York, and perhaps all of America. It has beaches, good public schools, clean tap water, restaurants for all food types, harbors, marinas, gyms, malls, etc. Also has nearly every fast food joint and car dealership one could want."

Parents, whether it was the ample supply of car dealerships, or clean tap water that brought you here, I think I can speak for this entire class when I say that our experience in the Huntington school district has made us so grateful you chose this town as the place to raise us.

I started in this district as a five year old at Jefferson Primary. It was a simpler time for sure; most of us were no bigger than*... *Dr. Leonardi*, but our dreams were boundless.

No matter what you aspired to back in kindergarten, or what you wish to pursue after today, the people here in Huntington have given us so much to help turn those dreams into reality.

Now, although no amount of gratitude could ever be enough to thank all of the faculty, staff, and administrators that brought us to this point, the Senior Class has decided on one way of giving back. Plans are underway to convert the two rooms connected to the cafeteria into one room, to be used as a Senior Lounge. We wanted to add to the privileges our seniors are granted after three years of high school by creating comfortable a space where students can go to relax, socialize, or “do work.”

On the first day of school this year, I got the chance to speak to our entire class. Gathered in the gym, you all listened to me say that we were going to make it a great year, that we had a lot of activities planned and that Homecoming prep was underway. If I could go back now, I don’t think I would have said any of that. I would have told us not to rush it, not to wish every Monday that Friday would come sooner, not to take any second for granted.

I wish I could have warned us about how fast our last year here would pass us by, because tomorrow we’ll have bigger choices than whether or not to say “hi” to the person coming down the hall that you’re *sorta* friends with but not *really* sure if it’s gonna make things weird.

Tomorrow there will be obstacles, and mistakes, and failures... yes Caitlin, failures. But at this point, we can either hide from these challenges,

or step forward into the world, ready to take on whatever it has to throw at us. I know that we are absolutely ready to choose the latter.

I said earlier that I was excited to have the chance to finally speak to you all at once. It's ironic though, because this time, there's no float party to tell everyone to attend, no spirit day I need you all to dress up for. All of that has been done. Done quite well if I do say so myself... And while I am certainly enjoying the undivided attention, it seems all I have left to say to my fellow classmates is thank you.

Thank you all for making this chapter in our lives, in my life, unforgettable. Congratulations Class of 2015, you are an extraordinary group of people and I am so lucky to have shared this journey with you.

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Principal 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 our Assistant Superintendent, Dr. Card and, 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.

Since this is my last graduation speech, I labored over it, wanting to make it a memorable one. So what could I say on this my fifteenth graduation speech when we know that my talk is all that stands between all of you and the final recognition that signifies graduation? I decided to be very brief and offer our seniors a condensed version of the three things I learned on the job:

1. Really listen to people.

You have heard the expression that you need to listen not only with your brain but also with your heart. Notice that the act of listening has very little to do with the mechanics of hearing. It does have to do with the engagement of your knowledge base and your ability to empathize. It does have to do with identifying the emotions people are bringing to a discussion and cutting through the words to

what people are actually sharing. Be forgiving and understanding as you listen, especially if you do not agree, and you might discover a point of view that expands your thinking even when you still do not agree with it.

2. Know that from now on where your education takes you is up to you.

Your experience in high school has been much more structured and prescribed than what you will experience in college, or work. Look critically at the selection of majors and courses, take courses that are not on the prescribed list and, just as Ms. Tedeschi has taught many of you, travel, learn firsthand what other cultures and countries have to offer. We know that the society you will continue to live in is a global one, embrace it.

3. Remember that your family is your greatest strength.

Don't forget your roots and the sacrifices your parents have made and will continue to make in order to give you a better future. What we have known for generations now is that, whether we like it or not, as we mature and age, we all get to resemble our parents. I know, at the moment that might be an unnerving thought, but that is why my advice to you is to start now to focus on your parents' good qualities so that when you see yourself doing something you swore you would never do, you can counterbalance it with reflecting on all the great qualities you also inherited from them.

And now, as it has been our tradition, I take pride in sharing some specific information about our seniors. As a group, the class of 2015 has not only demonstrated tremendous brainpower but has also shown the kind of heart and the dedication that are needed to make things happen. It boasts 9 of the original participants in the dual language program who have grown to be fully bilingual in

Spanish and English. It includes the most sophisticated, STEM minded group of individuals who know how to build. From Robotics to tractors, this class works hard and makes things happen. Members of this graduating class have successfully argued in Mock Trial and clocked the greatest number of volunteer hours in and out of school. From work done at the local YDA and Library to the support extended to students in our excellent Life Skills program, to the fundraising efforts during Relay for Life, our students have freely given of themselves in order to help others.

The class of 2015 received over 18 million dollars in scholarships, grants and financial aid. While in college students will participate in track and field, lacrosse, baseball and softball as well as swimming and soccer. These students have been accepted at very competitive colleges including Cornell, University of California, Fordham, Georgetown, University of Michigan, School of Visual Arts, University of Virginia, Worcester Polytechnic Institute as well as all SUNY and all CUNY schools. They will pursue majors in accounting, physical therapy, DGA golf management, nursing, film production, engineering, zoology, game design, mathematics, behavioral neuroscience, international relations, natural resources, supply chain management. This list truly represents the kind of young talent that our communities will need to rely on in future years in order to deal with the issues that will continue to face our nation.

I would like to end with a quote that is meant as much for you as myself as we move on to another exciting stage of our lives ...”What you leave behind is not what you leave engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven in the life of others.”(Pericles)

Congratulations class of 2015! May life continue to bring you satisfaction and joy.

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Charles Beers' Introduction of Salutatorian Joseph Saginaw

When Mr. Caleca first came to tell me that Joe wanted me to introduce him as this year's salutatorian, his words were "Keep it brief. Two to three minutes max." I was almost immediately confused. *I'm introducing Joe Saginaw, right?* I thought to myself. The GO President, the Robotics team founder, the Young Leader, the pole vaulting champ, the National Merit Scholar, and the AP Scholar with Distinction? You're kidding me. "Keep it brief?" It couldn't be done.

Three minutes can barely scratch the surface of what Joe has managed to accomplish these past four years, and the lasting impact he has had on the Huntington community at large. Throughout this time, I've seen him in many roles: as a President who inspired us to make Huntington High School a better place, as a defendant who kept me sane during intense Mock Trials, and a classmate in some of the most challenging and sleep-depriving classes we've ever taken. But none of these are nearly as important as his role in my life, and the lives of everyone he encountered in Huntington's hallways: a friend.

It seems that Joe was always there to help everyone throughout his high school career, through the good times and the bad. He was always modest about his talents, supportive both inside and out of school, and eager to make friends with anyone he came across.

So the true reason why Joe is being honored here today, something that I think we all know is going to be a trend for the coming years, is not just his

commitment to academics. Anyone can memorize facts and statistics, a point we talked about constantly over chicken-bacon slices at Rosa's and float parties before successful Homecoming parades. It's his willingness to go above and beyond what's asked of him: to be successful in everything he does and include others in these incredible achievements.

I think my friendship with Joe makes this point perfectly clear. If he wasn't who he is, I don't know if we would have become friends. How could two people with such polar opposite interests, an engineer and a writer who had never met before freshman year, become so close in such a short time? It's simply because he's Joe. He brings out the best in all of us and in himself. He inspires others to reach their true potential. He will lead our graduating class' charge into the real world, making a difference with his gifts and proving why the Class of 2015 is, and always will be, one of the greatest groups of Blue Devils this high school has ever seen.

So let's give a round of applause to this year's salutatorian, as well as one of the greatest friends we will have the good fortune of knowing, Joe Saginaw.

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Salutatorian Joseph Saginaw's Address

Thank you for the great introduction, Charles.

Good evening everyone, we are gathered here today to celebrate and mark a substantial change in our lives. Naturally, I would like to start with a little scientific background.

In evolutionary biology, one main factor that determines the survival of a species is its ability to adapt to change in its environment. Throughout history, human beings have had to react to different climates, events, and trends in order to survive and flourish. It will be no different for us.

On this day, we leave high school behind and go forward, more independent, more responsible, and more knowledgeable than ever before. Today, is not the first, nor the last of the many changes that will take place in our lifetime, and probably not the most important change either, but I am confident that whatever change we face, its impact on our lives will depend on how we rise to address it.

Class of 2015, I strongly believe that change is a good thing, and we will have to adapt and respond to change in order to be successful in the modern world and to make that world a better place. Just think of the changes that we have already experienced over these past 13 years; we started school for the first time, made friends, changed schools, took tests, and began driving. Look at what we

accomplished at Huntington High School; here, we have been the agents of change.

We have donated countless hours to improve our community and help those in need.

We have brought new experiences in the form of new events, teams, and clubs to our school.

We have risen to the challenge of rigorous academics, and succeeded.

We are also probably the first class to forgo a senior prank.

We are talented, creative, hardworking individuals who can achieve greatness when we set our sights on a goal.

On the eve of graduating high school, we must remember all that we have learned here, but move on to the next phase of our lives. Soon, each one of us will go our separate ways, with different goals in mind pursuing different opportunities, but we will all have to change, at many different points in our lifetime.

We should not be afraid to take the next step in life, because whether it be higher education, the workforce, military or a different path, we have all the necessary skills needed to succeed, and all we have to do is use them.

We are strong, capable people that are able to rebound in the wake of loss, persevere in the face of adversity, and learn from every failure. We need these

abilities in order to change, and ultimately succeed. We are the caretakers of the future, and we must embrace change emphatically.

It is ironic that I close with a quote by a man that I have been challenged to understand in every literary encounter I've had during my education, but William Shakespeare was right: the world **is** our oyster, and I say, don't be afraid to dive in after it.

Thank you.

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Superintendent James W. Polansky's Address

Good evening students, staff, parents and distinguished guests, and welcome to the culminating event of the 2014-15 school year. Back in the spring of 2012, a commencement address by an English teacher at a Massachusetts high school garnered a great deal of attention. Dubbed “You Are Not Special,” the speech attempted to convey the message that one cannot truly be special if everyone else around you is deemed special as well. The connotation was actually positive, suggesting the importance of independent thinking, learning for the sake of learning and living a relevant and fulfilling life.

I'd like to take a moment to focus on the concept of ‘special.’ By definition, ‘special’ is most often used as an adjective to suggest that something is better, greater or otherwise different. This ceremony represents a ‘special’ occasion, as it is not something that happens routinely. In fact, this will be the only high school graduation for each of you. The concept of ‘special’ may also be used to suggest something unique to a specific person or thing.

We, as humans, are among a number of species on the planet characterized by our differences. We are a function of our genetics and our environments. Despite the number of people on the planet, no genetic and environmental package is exactly the same. Even identical twins have different fingerprints and there is no way that their day-to-day experiences will be exactly the same regardless.

So let's draw the conclusion that each and every one of you is, in fact, special in more ways than one. You all possess unique features, personality traits, talents, challenges and perspectives. You have all had special moments, particularly during

your high school years. It may have been a higher than anticipated score on the Global History Regents or AP Biology exam. It may be that stellar NYSSMA performance or blue ribbon-winning acrylic painting. It may be the scientific research you conducted, the robot you built or the mock trial case you defended. It may be that record-breaking time in the 100-yard breaststroke or 2000-meter steeplechase, or that shot you made in an unprecedented sixth overtime of a classic basketball playoff contest. It may be the tractor you built or the opera you sang. It may be a contribution you made or time you gave for a cause or for your community. It may be specific time spent with your family and/or your friends. It may be your progressing with or mastering a second language or being a member of the first district Dual Language class to graduate Huntington High School.

But I think the question to ask yourselves today, and maybe this was the question that might have been asked in Massachusetts back in 2012, are these special qualities and experiences enough to get you where you wish to be in life?

I'll submit that they have laid the foundation for you, but it's all about what you do with them in the days, months and years to come. What you have achieved to date may reflect your unique talents and challenges, but I can almost guarantee that your proudest moments and accomplishments have followed considerable effort and hard work.

Many special people have failed to reach their true potential because they waited for things to come to them instead of grabbing the proverbial bull by the horns. Many special people have fallen short of their goals because they simply deferred to those whom they believed were the smartest or most skilled in the room. Many special people have not tried something they probably should have because they paid more attention to

statistics than their inner passion. Many special people have settled for something less in an effort to conform, instead of expressing their individuality.

We celebrate the past, present and future of nearly 300 uniquely special individuals this evening. But know that your being special does not mean the road ahead will always be an easy one. Success awaits, but you will need to stay connected with your purpose and maintain the vision of your desired end results, whatever they may be.

You will need to believe in yourselves and recognize that more than half the struggle you may experience is in your own minds. If you believe in yourselves, others will too. You will need to retain your humility and always remember 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.

You must be patient and demonstrate perseverance. Great works of literature and art and great invention are often produced by special individuals, but are more attributable to their patience and perseverance. Had these individuals with special gifts been impatient and apathetic, most, if not all of their creations would not have seen the light of the day. A telling quote from Michelangelo about his legacy ... “If you knew how much work went into it, you wouldn’t call it genius.”

Now it is time for you to exploit your special qualities. Do so with conviction, compassion and commitment. Further carve your unique niche and leave your mark on the world. I have no doubt that you will continue to make your former teachers and administrators, your families and friends and, most importantly, yourselves proud.

Congratulations to members of the Huntington High School Class of 2015 and their families! Happiness, health and success to you all for many, many years to come.

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Valedictorian Caitlin Knowles' Address

Members of the Board, Dr. Leonardi, Mr. Cusack, Mr. Polansky, parents, and fellow students, I am incredibly honored to stand before such a talented class of graduates. From excellent students, athletes, and musicians to superb artists, actors, and dancers, our class truly has it all. Our four years at Huntington High School were filled with your many accomplishments, and you should take pride in the fact that your hard work and spirit helped make our high school years memorable.

As I look back on my own memories, I immediately focus on my wonderful family, friends, teammates, teachers and coaches. I can't thank each of you individually unless you want to be stuck here until next September, but know that all of your contributions have been appreciated.

Upon closer examination of my memories, I notice another more interesting, subtler theme. Between fall of 2011 and spring of 2015, not only have we experienced incredible intellectual and emotional growth, but we have also faced an enormous number of challenges brought on by none other than terrible weather conditions. I'm not referring to a slight drizzle or a little wind chill. I'm talking about hurricanes, blizzards, and practically anything short of full-scale natural disasters. By late fall of my sophomore year, I was almost starting to think the creators of the movie *2012* were onto something. Don't worry; we're safe now, at least until Netflix starts allowing advertisements, because that will be its own kind of apocalypse.

As a result of these storms, we experienced a few cancellations. I'm sure every student here will recall the week and a half of school we missed for Hurricane Sandy, the snowstorm that postponed PlayFest, and our last midterm week that ended up becoming a string of snow days. Despite what you may be thinking, my focus on the weather does not stem from some hidden desire to pursue a career in meteorology or a cliché attempt to start a conversation. Instead, I see the amazing number of storms our class has had to endure during our time at Huntington High School as a symbol. Throughout all of this adversity, we still found a way to accomplish everything we strived to do and even enjoyed the process.

To combat the destruction caused by Hurricane Sandy, our very own Habitat for Humanity Club embarked on dozens of expeditions to Breezy Point to repair damaged homes. We may have missed a few days of school sophomore year for Superstorm Nemo, but we made Nemo our own force of nature this year when we won first place for the third year in a row with our Homecoming float. Even with the freezing cold temperatures at 3:00 A.M. during Relay for Life, we still raised over half a million dollars for cancer research over four years. Although we weren't able to perform our Lord of the Rings show in PlayFest, I'll bet anyone who was supposed to wear a Gollum mask considered that a precious development.

In the midst of these difficult storms, our class of 2015 found a way to dance in the rain, or the snow if you were the Highsteppers at the football county championship. Our ability to face these storms at so many of our school events and still have an amazing time reflects our improved ability to overcome obstacles in life to find happiness. To me, the most important

lesson we have learned at Huntington High School is that regardless of circumstances, if we can keep a positive attitude, we will simultaneously achieve greatness and experience joy.

As you move on to the next stages of your lives, you may not be completely in control of the world around you, but you are one hundred percent in charge of how you view it. You can choose to be happy in any situation, and you can find a way to bring positivity into this world, no matter how small. In this way, you are in control of your own destiny.

Every day offers a new opportunity to discover your passion and devote yourself to sharing your gifts with the world. Find what you love to do, and care about it. Never forget the importance of compassion in life. Care about the people around you, care about giving back to your community, care about your education, and care about yourself. I promise you that you will find a world of happiness if you choose to take on the view that every second of your life and every opportunity to find joy matter.

Go out into the world believing that you are prepared to succeed. Have confidence in yourself and your abilities. As a talented basketball player by the name of Joe Harris once said, "Expect to win." Be confident knowing that you can take on whatever life throws at you with a positive attitude and an unyielding determination to never give up. I know that I will always have confidence in this class' immense potential to achieve based on the amazing accomplishments you have already given to the Huntington community and those that I am certain you will bring to the world in the

future. I wish you all the best of luck in your future endeavors, and I can't wait to see the incredible success of Huntington's Class of 2015!