

Huntington High School's 155th Commencement

Salutatorian Olivia Stamatatos' Address

Good evening everybody. Thank you all so much for coming to this momentous occasion! Before I begin, I would like to thank my Mom, Dad, brother and sisters, grandparents, and the rest of my family members for their undulating love and support. Without them, I would be nowhere close to the person I am today. I would also like to thank Mrs. Croke, Mr. Cusack, Mr. Caleca, Mr. Smith, Mr. DeTroia, the academic, musical, and custodial staff of Huntington High School, and, most of all, the students of Huntington High School's Class of 2016 and this year's valedictorian, Miss Rachel Carpenter.

Although I have only attended the high school for three short years, I have made unforgettable memories and met extraordinary people who have touched my life in ways that I never thought were possible. I cannot thank you enough for the experiences, and I will always cherish the time we have spent together.

As our time at Huntington High School draws to a close and we embark on our journeys into that vast, abysmal abstraction that we call "the future," we have often been asked two ostensibly simple questions: "What career do you intend to have?" and "What do you plan to do with the rest of your life?" Although these questions seem relatively straightforward, they are difficult for high school seniors or a person of any age to answer, unless you have had that "aha" moment and you have your future precisely planned out. If any one of you is so certain, I salute you; I wish I could be so certain. For others, the answer may be very simple: "I'll do whatever makes me the most money."

However, even if you have already made a decision about how you intend to live your life, you should remain open to all the endless possibilities. We are at a critical juncture at this point in our lives: the world is ours to explore regardless of whether or not we will attend college this upcoming Fall. At no other time have we had as much control and responsibility for what happens to us as we do now. Why would we choose to restrain ourselves to one career, one field of study, one possibility for our futures? With the world at our disposal, there is no reason to do this to ourselves. Instead, we should focus on finding the answer to this question: “What makes you happy?”

Now, I know that some of you may be groaning in your seats and saying to yourselves, “Oh, here we go again... I’ve heard this all before,” but the truth is, this is an important question to answer and it’s an exigent topic that needs to be addressed. If we live our lives unhappily, then what’s the point? What’s the point of having a lucrative job and a nice car if you aren’t happy?

Albeit this novel is fictional, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* exemplifies the concept of money not being equivalent to happiness. I’m pretty sure that we all know the story of Jay Gatsby, the mystery man in the pink suit who hosts lavish parties every weekend and serves champagne in glasses larger than finger-bowls. Despite his wealth and luxurious life, he pines every night for the woman he will never have: Daisy Buchanan. In the end, when Daisy’s husband becomes cognizant of the affair, Daisy refuses to spend her life with Gatsby, and any hope of Gatsby obtaining his happiness is dispelled. So what happens to the protagonist after he has no hope of living a happy life? F. Scott Fitzgerald has him murdered in one of the final chapters.

Regardless of whether or not you agree with my interpretation of the novel or with what I have said about the importance of happiness, I think we can all agree that life is too short to be replete with regrets and unhappiness. Therefore, as you proceed forth into the worlds of academic and experiential learning, discover your passions, enjoy everything that life has to offer and never let anyone tell you that you don't deserve what you want!! You are all such exceptionally talented people whose futures are exorbitantly bright, and you all deserve to be happy, whether that happiness comes from performing on stage, making music from a bunch of dots on lined pieces of paper, trading stocks on Wall Street (if you find the high stress environment to be pleasurable), or something as simple as watching a great movie with your family.

Once you discover the activities and people that flood your hearts with immense joy, make sure that you hold onto them tightly and find a way to support yourselves financially by doing the things that you love. If you live your lives in such a manner, then you'll come to realize that, although you only live once, if you do it right, once is more than enough. Thank you!

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Valedictorian Rachel Carpenter's Address

Thank you to all of the parents, teachers, faculty and friends who have come out to see us commemorate our grand accomplishment this evening. It is an appropriate time of day to celebrate, I think, if not a bit unconventional for graduations. As the sun hangs tentatively in the sky, we are able to breathe in the day we just lived, and prepare for the coming sunrise. All of our lives, we have been told to prepare for the next step, the next moment in our lives. Take a moment and reflect, are you what you want to be, are you ready for the next step?

I have no sage wisdom to give you, I will not stand up here and tell you things I cannot know. But I can tell you the things that I hope. I hope that in your life, you find happiness and joy, but you also find the depths of sadness, and learn how to climb out of that dark abyss. I hope that you find something or someone you love, come to understand that love and do your best to keep it a part of you. But above all, I hope that you never forget to hope. To look towards tomorrow, that bright and beautiful horizon that brings life to every new day. The sun as it sets can signal an ending, this sun that we see tonight sets on our high school careers. But the wonder of the sun is that it will always rise again. What will the sun illuminate for you, in the early hours of morning tomorrow? (Or perhaps I should say, late morning to mid-afternoon, we are teenagers after all).

The world is vast and we are small. Yes, our time is limited. But that does not mean that our actions are limited. I had so hoped to avoid clichés in this speech, but I must include one that I ardently believe in-nothing is impossible to a

willing heart. This world is ours for the taking, so do not waste it! You have courage and strength within you that you have yet to discover! Take risks, because you do not want to live with regrets. Treat all of life as you have your time in the classroom. That may sound a bit odd, because for the past four years, twelve even, like me, I am sure you have wanted nothing but to escape the narrow confines of the school grounds, and begin your life in the real world. But we have learned much more than how to simply read and write in these now empty halls behind me.

Lesson #1: Pay attention in class- keep your ears and eyes open to the people and the world around you. There is so much beauty and wonder in this world of ours, it would be a shame to let it go unnoticed.

Lesson #2: Do your homework. Apply the lessons you have learned to your life, be kind, be brave, be inquisitive. Do not simply let life pass by you. Everyone dies, but not everyone lives. Be an active player in this game of life. Define your own life, make it something worth living.

Finally, we have Lesson #3: Respect your peers. Our abilities may not be equal, but we are all human. We all feel, we all ache, and we all live one life here on earth. Isn't it just marvelous to think that the person sitting next to you has thoughts of their running through their beautiful minds at this very moment, thoughts that may be similar to your own? That they may be sitting beside you, seeing the same person stand before you, hearing the same words she is speaking but may be experiencing something very different from you. You have no idea how impactful one person can be on one's life. Be that one person to another.

“...no matter how you get there or where you end up, human beings have this miraculous gift to make that place home.” - Creed Bratton, *The Office*.

Standing here before you, I must take a quick moment while I have your attention to thank you. Thank you for helping me discover a home here at Huntington High School, thank you for welcoming me, for being that person to impact me in a most profound way. When I moved here four years ago, you did not have any obligation to me, you did not have to take me in as you did. But you did not cast me aside, or leave me to learn the ins and outs of the crazy world of high school by myself; you taught me how to laugh even when it seemed that I could not muster a smile, taught me that grades do not define me, which hallways to avoid and when, and of course, how to properly do an air squat. I can honestly say that each and every one of you have impacted me throughout these four years, whether you were aware of that or not.

All that I am today, I owe to you, my peers, my friends, my teachers, my mentors, and to this wonderful, wonderful school that brought us all together. Even though we might not be able to decide on a class t-shirt, I hardly think that matters in the grand scheme of things. I'll be honest, I won't remember what our float looked like from homecoming, and I won't remember which team won the volleyball tournament, and for that matter, you all probably won't remember this speech I am giving today. But I will forever remember this moment right now, looking out across all of you today. I have no right to be up here speaking to you all. This is *our* graduation, this is our moment. Together.

As we head into the great wide world, we will go our separate ways. We may use some of the knowledge we learned here in our future, and some things we will forget. Some memories will forever glisten in our minds and others will be lost

deep in the archives of our subconscious. Perhaps the friendships we made here will endure, perhaps they will not. But one thing will endure: this class. All of us, sitting here together today, on the brink of becoming Class of 2016, graduates of Huntington High School. Our sun has finally set, so rejoice in the fading light, revel in the coming night, and know that your tomorrow will be bright.

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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 2016. It gives me a great sense of pride seeing you here this evening. You, the members of the class of 2016, are particularly special to me, as we all entered Huntington High School together.

I came in as a new assistant principal when most of you did as freshman. I think our experiences may have been similar; being in a new place and unsure of what to expect can be overwhelming and scary. Four years later, here we are and we have all grown significantly. You have moved beyond the role of unsure freshmen and become a class of young adults who are ready to take on the challenges ahead. You are award-winning artists, high-achieving scholars, nationally acclaimed athletes, amazing musicians, scientists, writers, mathematicians, engineers, entrepreneurs and politicians. You have excelled in every facet of school life here at Huntington High School and I simply could not be more proud of all you have accomplished. As you get ready to move into the next phase of your life, I want you to remember this transformation. Many of you will be starting again as unsure freshmen, but know that in no time at all, you will again excel in all that you do.

There is one area of expertise, however, of which I have not yet spoken, and this may be the most important field of all. Our world indeed needs experts in all of the areas I have mentioned and many more. I have every confidence that you will fulfill these needs with your knowledge, hard work and out-of-the-box

thinking. But what the world needs now, perhaps more than ever, are those individuals who truly consider the ideas of others and who truly care for one another. In short, the world not only needs you to become experts in your respective fields, but also to become masters of kindness and doctors of empathy.

To be able to truly understand the plight of others and to have the ability and courage to do something about it is the most relevant skill set of all. No matter what path you follow, no matter what area of expertise you choose, the simple act of being kind and understanding to others, and holding this as your personal guiding philosophy will take you further, it will take others further and it will cost you absolutely nothing. People inherently know when you care about them, and they know when you don't. People have an acute ability to know when you are truly listening, and when you're not.

In order to get ahead in life, there is no question that you need knowledge and skills. But if you develop the ability to truly connect with others, you will open the door to becoming even more successful while helping others to do the same. I have heard this phrase turned many different ways, but all of its iterations are true: *If people don't know how much you care, no one will care how much you know.*

I was recently at a conference at NYU this past spring with a number of colleagues and we were treated to a brilliant talk by a wonderful educator, Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade. He shared a brief story with us, and it seemed fitting that I share it with you today:

In a rural village, somewhere deep in the hills of Central America, a boy awoke with a start and ran to his grandmother for comfort. “Abuelita!” he cried, “I need you!” “What is it, Mijo?” she asked as he hid his face in her arms. The boy answered, “I don’t know... I feel like there is a war inside my head!” As you might expect, she asked for a few more details. He elaborated, “It’s like two wolves are always fighting inside of me and they’re making so much noise I can’t even think! On one side is an evil wolf, full of hate and jealousy. He’s mean and angry and he wants to take over! He only cares about himself.” The grandmother asked about the other wolf. “Well,” the boy answered, “He’s kind and generous. He brings light wherever he goes. He’s so nice, he even cares about the bad wolf!” In an effort to calm him, the grandmother explained, “It’s ok, my son, we all have this conflict inside us. It’s normal to feel this way.” The boy calmed down, but still he looked confused. “Granny,” he said, “I still have a question... which wolf wins the fight?” The grandmother kept him close and looked him in the eye. “Mijo,” she said carefully, “The wolf who wins... is the one you feed.”

I ask that you, our soon-to-be graduates, take this to heart. Feed the good wolf daily and let this animal inside drive you to be ferocious in your desire to help one another, ruthless in your love of humanity and savage in your drive to leave this world a better place than you found it.

Class of 2016, Blue Devils, I thank you for an outstanding four years. We will all miss you, we love you and we wish you the very best as you go forth and continue to do amazing things. Thank you and congratulations!

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School Board President Thomas DiGiacomo's Address

Good evening everyone and welcome I would first like to congratulate the entire Class of 2016 on your graduation from Huntington High School. You should be proud of the hard work that has gotten you here today. I would also like to congratulate and commend the parents, grandparents, teachers, principals, administrators, coaches and quite honestly anyone who has in some way helped guide you to attain this achievement today.

As I stand here before you, I am both honored and humbled at the accomplishments of this Class. You have excelled academically. You have been recognized as National Champions, State Champions and County Champions. These accomplishments make this Blue Devil and all Huntington Blue Devils proud. 37 years ago, I sat exactly where you are sitting today. Truth be told, my thoughts back on that day were, I am out, graduated, so goodbye Huntington High. Apparently, I was wrong. And what I came to realize is that being a Huntington High School graduate and a Blue Devil is truly something special and never leaves you.

No matter how much you might think you're done here. It remains a part of you. Forever connecting you to this school, your fellow graduates and this town. Some may not feel that way now, but trust me when I say at some point, you too will come to realize how special being a Huntington Blue Devil is.

Today your Blue Devil connection may be to a favorite class or teacher. Maybe it's a sport you played, a drama club production, music, the arts or another group or club or a friend you have made. Down the road, as you start a career, it may be running into another Huntington Blue Devil, at your first job.

If you take a look around this school today, there are Huntington Blue Devils everywhere, and not just the ones painted on the walls. These are people; Blue Devils that you may have already connected to. Their inner Blue Devil has brought them back to Huntington to make a difference, as mentors, teachers, coaches and leaders. Blue Devils like Kevin Thorbourne, Class of 88 and the Young Leaders. Or Dean and Coach Ronnie Wilson, Class of 94 or Coaches Billy Harris and Shawn Anderson. Maybe it was some of my fellow classmates that also were on this field in 1979. Teachers like Mrs. Martha Reilly or Mrs. Lori Haggerty, Coach Steve Muller or Coach and Security Guard Todd Jamison, or photographer extraordinaire Mike Connell, yes all my 79 classmates. Possibly it's one of my fellow School Board trustees like Mrs. Rogan, Class of 83 or Mr. Palacios, Class of 88. There are so many others I could mention, that have come to make a difference as Huntington Blue Devils. It is a true testament to how special being from Huntington High School and being a Blue Devil is.

So if it's not today, whether it's in a year, five years, or even 30 years. I hope you come to find why being a Huntington Blue Devil is as special for you, as I have also found out. It is something that will always be with you, throughout your life and I hope will continue to provide your fond memories and a connection to your years here. So from this Huntington Blue Devil, to all of the Class of 2016 Huntington Blue Devils. I wish you only the best and I hope that you enjoy

whatever and wherever your lives end up taking you. As well, I hope this is not your final goodbye to Huntington High. Congratulations once again.

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Superintendent James W. Polansky's Address

Good evening and welcome to Huntington's 155th Commencement Exercises.
(155th – what a tradition!)

You know, I have memories from my childhood of my dad telling me so routinely about the days he spent as a kid in a far-away land (that would be East 19th Street in Brooklyn) and eventually his experiences at Cunningham Junior High School and Madison High School. It amazes me when I think back on those conversations, as his recollection of detail was uncanny – the stickball games, the corner store, Dodger Stadium, and the people – I almost feel like I knew some of them personally, although the visions I formed were based only upon the stories he told me. I often asked him questions that would prompt him to tell me some of those stories again and again because: (a.) I enjoyed hearing them, as he would always spice them up; and (b.) it reinforced the fact that he was not born as an adult and was a kid at some point during his lifetime.

Incredibly, decades later, I found myself telling similar stories to my own kids about my childhood days, a world that extended only as far as a bicycle could take you, and, again and most importantly, the people – the friends, the neighbors, the teachers and others, each of whom impacted my life in some unique way.

Each generation, each of us, has a story and a place. Huntington High School Class of 2016 members, consider your story and your place.

You began kindergarten in September of 2003. Our country was still

rebounding from the events of September 2001, but for you and your families, this was a time of optimism for all things new. You were excited about your new clothes, a fresh box of Crayolas, and riding on a big yellow bus. You were eager to meet your teacher, to meet new friends, to learn and to play. You knew school was an exciting place to be because your parents told you so.

By the summer before the first of your Woodhull or Jack Abrams Intermediate School years, you knew your multiplication tables and were reading chapter books. You were eager to get back to school, catch up with old friends and meet new ones from other far-away primary school lands. You looked forward to the challenging subjects and projects in which intermediate school students might engage. You knew these things were in your immediate future because you were an old hand at school by now.

Another few summers and you were off to Finley. Now approaching your teenage years, you were even more excited to reunite with the old and meet yet another group of new friends, change classes and rooms during the day, and have your first real choices about what you would learn. You knew these things because you were pretty cool.

Two more years and you entered the world of Huntington High School. You were eager to do the things that high school kids get to do. You were also a little nervous about starting high school, but tried to appear unfazed so nobody could tell how you really felt. Many of you were probably a bit more reserved and tentative at first, a little intimidated by the expectations and the pace. But you quickly realized that the opportunities were abundant and your success after graduation depended on your hard work and responsibility.

Through all of these academic transitions, recognize that there were some very important constants. Look in front of you; look behind you; look to your right, look to your left, look in the bleachers. You will surely see many faces, some a bit more mature, that you recall from those days in 2003 or not long thereafter.

Tonight for the last time, you are all gathered in one place. You will listen to speeches, as you are now. Your mind will sometimes wander as you try to pay attention. You will hear your friends whisper and the band play, and you will realize more than ever before how good they sound. And you will also realize that these Huntington faces – those of good friends, classmates, teachers, administrators, neighbors, community members – are etched in your minds permanently, along with the visions of your old school hallways and the times you spent within them. They are all permanent and everlasting pages in your story.

As your name is called shortly, you will come forward to get your diploma. You will stand tall, just as you practiced, thinking such things as "I will not trip," "When can we eat?" or, as eloquently stated by one of you in your yearbook, "I crushed it." As you turn to the audience, we will watch you proudly, for we have all been part of your story.

Class of 2016, tonight your story does not come to an end. You have lived and come of age in a community that cares deeply about you. In this place, you have learned and demonstrated core values of compassion, integrity, respect, responsibility, and service. These are now your values to live by and to pass on. But always know that in your story, Huntington will forever be your place. You are and always will be a part of *Blue Devil nation*.

I know that many of you have been counting the days until graduation. I speak

from experience that time will start to move more quickly as you move past this milestone. With that said, remind yourselves regularly to slow down and take it all in, ups and downs included.

What commencement address would be complete without a quote? I'll contribute a simple one from Muhammad Ali that resonated with me following his recent passing. Make it resonate with you as well. "Don't count the days. Make the days count."

My sincerest congratulations and best wishes!