

Kira Griffith

12th grade

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Valedictorian Speech

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”

-Marianne Williamson

Good evening parents, friends, teachers, faculty, and distinguished guests. Welcome to the graduation for the Class of 2017!!! This graduating class has distinguished itself in many ways. To give you a bit of perspective, the majority of my classmates are members of the National Honor Society, we have lifeguards, competitive swimmers, a junior Olympian, National Art Contest winners, dance choreographers, an international science fair guru, and student government leaders. For Orange, White, and Blue day this year, White Team made history as the first group ever to win four years in a row. We are also the first class to go through all four years of high school together since Good Hope and Country Day School merged. A round of applause for that! So, as you can imagine, preparing the valediction for such an impressive class was quite a challenge.

To stand here before you today is both an honor and a great privilege that I am deeply grateful for. With that said, when I sat down to start writing the speech I spent a few grueling days staring at a blank sheet of paper. I didn't know what to say that could adequately describe my life and the last four years I have spent with this amazing class. However, eventually, I started writing and I have decided that today, I am going to tell you all two stories: one from my early childhood and one from my high school years. I'll explain to you how the lessons I learned from both of these experiences have helped shape me as a person and how they can guide you all in your future endeavors.

The first story is about one of the most feared concepts known to mankind: Change. I've experienced quite a bit of change in my life. I was 18 months old when my parents decided to move from Miami to the Virgin Islands. Not much later, my sister Nyla was born and I was suddenly a big sister! At 6 years old, I remember sitting down on the carpet in Rattan Montessori, legs crossed, and thinking about transitioning to St. Mary's. "St. Mary's??", I thought. "Do they even have nap time?? How am I supposed to go an entire day without a nap

time?!!". I still miss my Montessori naps. Some would argue that we should have nap times in high school too but that's a discussion for another time.

Six weeks into my St. Mary's adventure, I found myself facing another challenge. I was in my small, blue car seat, sitting in the back of a brown GMC one afternoon watching my mother drive. She had just picked me up from another day of school at St. Mary's and we were on our way to pick up my sister from Montessori. Suddenly she asked, "Kira, what do you think about going to the third grade?" I had a puzzled look on my face so she went on and said, "The principal, daddy, and I were talking and the principal said you should get a skip." Now, let's pause a moment and think about this. I just experienced the difficult process of switching to a new school and making new friends in a brand new environment and now I'm just supposed to eagerly "skip"?

Nevertheless, a few days later, I found myself standing in the third grade line at the morning assembly shaking with fear. I was so scared my mother had to pull me aside. She talked to me, encouraged me, and consoled me like she has done since the day I was born and then sent me back in line with my new peers.

I felt a little better afterwards but I was still frightened and extremely shy as I sat in the corner of the front row in the third-grade classroom. So, you can imagine how elated I was to see my father walk in the room a few hours later to see me. After being excused from class, he sat next to me on an old bench right outside the classroom and said something that has stuck with me ever since. He said, "Change is hard, but you shouldn't be afraid of it. People everywhere are afraid of change, but all you have to do is work hard and you will do well. Don't let fear ever stop you from doing something." I went back into that classroom with a newfound confidence that I have carried with me to this day. We all can fear change at times but often it is a window to new opportunity. So seize it! When you want something whether it is to succeed in third grade or write a speech, you call on the universe, believe in your heart that you already have it, and then seize the opportunity when it comes.

The second story is about the importance of knowing one's history and heritage. In AP English this year, we read a book titled "Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad. It is a nineteenth century novella that depicts the perspective of a white voyager named Marlow as he journeys up the Congo River into Africa to what he calls the heart of darkness. Now, in this story, Marlow not only travels physically deeper into the unknown jungles of the Congo but psychologically

deeper into the undiscovered parts of himself. Through his journey, he witnesses the selfishness of men who begin to submit themselves to their immediate desires. He watches as they not only forget their family and friends but lose the essence of their humanity. As I was reading this novella, I realized that we are at the point in our lives where we have the wonderful opportunity to learn more about ourselves in college, but in the process of making that discovery, we must remain connected with and have a deep understanding of our heritage.

“Heart of Darkness” did two things for me. First, it reminded me of the horrors of slavery endured by my ancestors. Second, and more importantly, it made me realize that the very opportunities before me today are brought about by their steadfast belief in and fight for freedom. We owe a great debt of gratitude to those who came before us, those who paved the way for us. I am profoundly grateful to God for our parents, family, friends, teachers, coaches, and everyone and everything that has made me and this class who we are right now at this moment. Thank you to all my teachers at St. Mary’s. Thank you to Mr. Kari Loya, the faculty members, and the Board of Trustees at Good Hope Country Day School. I want to thank Ms. Jane for building the foundation I needed to excel. Thank you, Ms. Shuman, for cultivating my devout love and passion for music and the discipline required to reach my goals. Thank you, Ms. Sonja, for teaching me how to carry myself with grace and poise. Finally, I would like to thank my parents. Mommy and Daddy, thank you for instilling in me the compassion, gratitude, generosity, self-confidence, determination, and independence necessary for me to be where I am right now. Thank you for teaching me the tremendous value of visualization; The importance of visualizing my goals, believing in them, and acting on them. Most of all, thank you for teaching me that just as Aristotle once said “We are what repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

It is important that we all embrace change, but it is just as important that we stay grounded in our history and heritage and be grateful for the sacrifices of those who supported us in our journey. “Be grateful for what you have and you will attract more good things.”

At the beginning of this speech, I quoted Marianne Williamson who once said, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” She went on to say that “It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of

God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

So, Class of 2017, if I can leave you with one message, let it be: Embrace change, honor your heritage, and carry your light into the unknown with courage, gratitude, and passion.