

2010 Alumnus of the Year Speech

Mark Parsells, Class of 1978

Good Afternoon, President Schmidt, Trustees, Dr. Newman, Distinguished faculty and staff, Parents, family, friends, alumni and, of course, the graduating Class of 2010. Speaking to you today is not only a great honor and privilege, but it marks a milestone in my life. I am 50 years old. 32 years ago, when I was in your seat, I *never, ever* thought I would be 50 years old.

The implications of being your speaker frighten me. For one thing, if a 50-year-old guy spoke at my graduation ceremony, he was about the last person I'd believe. I know, when I spoke at Baccalaureate in 1978, I was similarly frightened because I assumed the last person all these old people in the audience would ever want to listen to is a high school kid.

But we do have one thing we have in common. I spent 13 years in the exact same hallowed halls of the Academy as you have. And at graduation, we were seated in alphabetical order, it went Parsells, Pettis - so I was seated next to my friend Eric Pettis. I'm sure you know him as "Taylor's dad." Eric, times flies, doesn't it. I'm sorry I only have 8 minutes to speak or boy could we have fun!

In the very short time I have to speak to you, I want to speak to you about just three things - 1) Intellectual Independence, 2) Fair Play and Resilience and 3) Respect - these are the three core lessons that I learned from the Academics, Athletics and Culture of the Academy that have served as the foundation of most everything I have done in my life.

First - Intellectual Independence

Academically, the Academy uniquely prepares you to do one thing better than anywhere else I have studied - that is to learn **HOW** to think. Sure you learn English, History, Chemistry, Statistics, French, etc. - but it is not so much what you are learning that counts **but how you are learning**.

You don't study to memorize rote facts, you are given the information and taught to think for yourself, to make your own judgments and trust what you believe. In every class, we were

encouraged to always find the whole story, to think outside the box, to find the truth. If a survey said 65% of people favor a certain thing, we were taught to ask "what do the other 35% think and why?" Who wrote the survey and what were their motives? One thing is certain, Academy Graduates are **not** Lemmings.

Your Academy training demands that you not blindly follow the masses. Trust your intellect, a bad idea is just that, a bad idea, no matter what. When everyone around you is raving about the Emperor's new clothes, it is the Academy student who must stand-alone and say - I only see a naked Emperor - and, please, offer him a pair of shorts.

Throughout my academic and business career, knowing **how to think** is what allowed me whatever success I have had. You are taught to respectfully question ideas that don't make sense. Just remember, it is easy to identify bad ideas, but you must also be ready to come up with a better idea - be a problem solver - have that pair of shorts for the Emperor ready!

Second - Fair Play and Resilience

At the academy you learn to play to win and to play cleanly. It wasn't just sports, but drama competitions, art competitions, running for student council - the same rules applied. Coaches Stewart, St, John and Gonzales, (they were old guys then, they were in at least their mid to late twenties for goodness sake!) collectively, taught us how to be humble in winning, gracious and resilient in losing, and to always display good sportsmanship. Whatever happened, we learned the resilience to quickly bounce back from adversity.

That lesson of resilience was never more critical to me then when I learned I had Lymphoma at age 35. My Academy training taught me not to panic, but to research and find the best doctor in the world for treatment. Interestingly, from the research that my brother David and I did, if I had gotten the disease when I was graduating high school, there was no cure at that time, and I would have died. But at 35, a cure had been developed with a 99% success rate.

(My Mother thought I was being brave when I told her I had Hodgkin's Disease but that it was no big deal. She had picked up her old Encyclopedia Britannica that said that everyone who got the disease died from it. She called my brother and he confirmed that I was not being brave, just that she needed a new set of Encyclopedia's!).

Other than the radiation treatments that weakened my vocal cords, which is why it is hard to understand me sometimes, I have been cured for 14 years and never look back. My Academy training enables me to push forward, regardless of the setbacks in life like having a permanently damaged voice.

Class of 2010, you will be tempted - but never forget that it is never ok to play dirty. It is always better to lose a game, flunk a test, lose a job or lose a big paycheck than to compromise your integrity by cheating - you can recover from any of those loses, but you can never recover from losing your reputation.

Instead, preserve and obey the rules of fair play at all times. If you never lie, cheat, or steal, you will never have to remember who you lied to, how you cheated, and what you stole.

Finally, Respect.

Respect for everyone is the foundation of the culture of the Academy, it is this simple value that will form and shape you in ways that you will only realize with the passage of time. The school fostered an environment of diversity and respect long before there was such a term as "Diversity." **The Golden Rule prevails; you treat others how you want to be treated.** We treated the head of school, Mr. Horner the same as we treated Mr. Lalley, the head of Maintenance - with respect and gratitude for what they did for us.

The Academy has long had a global view with strong language programs, foreign exchange students and a global focus.) It is only natural that the Academy has become one of the few elite schools to offer the International Baccalaureate Program. My own exposure to learning about the World while at the Academy led me to do a graduate degree in Belgium; to live and work in London and to manage a global organization with thousands of employees in 72 countries. *Your world* will be more global than ever - I hope that the presence of the IB program has gotten you all prepared to think and live in a global, highly interdependent world.

Finally, Respect needs to extend beyond your circle of friends. Find worthy causes to which you contribute your time, talents and financial resources. Remember this, the time you spend focused on yourself stays with you, however, the time you spend focused on helping others, lives on well after you are gone.

In parting, Class of 2010, I ask you to stay true to yourself, trust yourself - PROTECT THE *HERITAGE* OF THIS 225 YEAR OLD SCHOOL BY YOUR ACTIONS. And, in the words of Henry David Thoreau - "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined."

Congratulations and good luck