

Class of 2010 Salutatorian Speech

Sophie Stone

Welcome Class of 2010, Mark Parsells, faculty, staff, family, and friends to the 225th Commencement Ceremony of the Harrisburg Academy. It is a great honor to be able to speak to you this afternoon. As each of you looks back on this year, I am sure that you are proud of what you yourself, your son or daughter, your friend, or your student has accomplished. Among us are: Ivy League-bound students; National Merit Scholarship Finalists; International Students who are now completely bilingual; now-famous tennis players; three-time SIAC basketball champions; Best and the Brightest honorable mentions; accomplished musicians; and unsung heroes who may not have a title but who are also of great character and of great mind.

As we reflect on these achievements, it is easy to label this wonderful Class of 2010 as a group of bright, talented individuals. But who helped us become the successful young adults that you see before you today? Who quizzed us on our Latin, French, and Spanish words? Who enrolled us in soccer, basketball, ballet, football when we were too young to even reach the highest cupboard in the kitchen? Who sat us down at the piano, or with our violins, violas, cellos, flutes when we just didn't want to practice? Who coached us on how to apply to college, how to study properly, how to take a test? And who gave us the knowledge and the experience that we went on to utilize when we were achieving the successes and honors that I have already listed?

The answer to each of these questions is "you." Our parents, our teachers, our advisors, our tutors, our mentors, our friends. While each of us is proud to say that in the past few years, we have grown independent enough to study on our own, drive ourselves to our activities, and manage our own time responsibly, our habits and abilities hold their roots in the manner by which you raised us and taught us. On behalf of the Class of 2010, I would like to thank you for everything that you have given us over the past 18 years.

However, classmates: I cannot thank each person who has helped to shape who you are; this is your task.

Throughout our time in high school, each one of us can admit to complaining at least once about an assignment, a class, a teacher, a parent, our school. For those of us that have been here since before high school, our time spent in Middle School was likely filled with

Challenging our students in an environment that nurtures and inspires.

complaints - because although the work was lighter than what we have experienced in our Upper School classes, every twelve-year-old, by definition, has to complain about something.

Classmates, what I want you to remember are the times during which you did not complain. For some of you, this will be the field trips, recesses, or gym classes - times of leisure and freedom. For others, this will be our Senior Privileges - as we were finally recognized as responsible adults. For all of you, this should be a class, a teacher, or simply a unit covered that you truly enjoyed. The experiences given to us by the Academy are ones worth cherishing. Without the Academy, you may not have learned which career you plan to enter, as our Senior Internships may have taught you this. The Academy has allowed you to participate in whichever sport you please, as we have a no-cut policy and coaches who will focus on each player's needs. The band, orchestra, and Drama Program have also encouraged you to partake in their activities. The opportunities offered to you were endless, and when we become alumni in less than an hour, more opportunities will become available, as Mr. Gonzalez and other members of the Alumni Office will undoubtedly make known to you the many events, social gatherings, and money-making opportunities to which alumni are invited.

As those of you who heard my internship presentation know, I learned much about the Harrisburg School District during my three weeks as an intern, as I worked closely with Dr. Gerald Kohn, former Superintendent of Schools. I would like to share with you some facts about the district so that you can recognize how fortunate we've been to have these many opportunities.

In 2000, there were more students in the Harrisburg district incarcerated than graduated. There was neither a pre-school program nor a remedial math and English program for students who needed extra help. Though it is hard to believe, at the high school, many students had no schedules. There was no curriculum; teachers taught what they wanted to teach. By Christmas 2000, no report cards had been issued. Weapon and drug violations were not reported. Even though the teachers cherry-picked only 2/3 of the student body to take the PSSAs in hopes that the better students would pass this state-issued test meant to measure the competence of students, only 32% of them were deemed "Basic" or "Proficient" - the rest failed. Only a quarter of the students entering the first grade reached grade 12.

To you, Class of 2010, these statistics likely seem like those of a Third-World country. How could these students be treated so poorly, by families and the adults in charge of the schools? How could they be allowed to fail basic reading, math, and language tests? How could there be no structure and no push for student success?

Over the past ten years, of course, things have improved exponentially, and are now much more promising. Graduation rates are up 171%, drop-outs are down 53%, and college acceptances are up 419%. But in most cases, these students are achieving despite the challenges in their lives; most of them have very little support at home.

When compared to the Harrisburg Academy, as well as to the schools from which you came before you attended this one - whether it be a school in the Camp Hill, Cumberland Valley, Central Dauphin, or Millersburg districts, or a religiously-affiliated school - the opportunities and preparation of those in the Harrisburg district pale.

Remember that these schools are merely across the river from our own, and yet the differences might as well separate us from these students by thousands of miles.

Never forget the immense amount of good fortune that has been bestowed upon us. We are all so lucky that our parents have worked extremely hard to be able to pay for an amazing education at the Academy. They have cared enough to ensure that our needs are met. We are also fortunate that our teachers work for a salary that is considerably smaller than that at a public school; and yet they too care so much about our well-being that they teach intensely difficult classes, work long hours, and take time to mold our young minds. Because of them, each one of us is going on to study at an incredible school. Each one of us is going to make our place in the world.

Nothing's definite career-wise for me, but Jane Moreland may be the one treating your animals when they fall ill. Nat Black-Heaven may be working as a conservationist to save the Earth from the damage that we have done to it. Sarah Weyl may be handling your legal affairs. If I understood *anything* about engineering, I could tell you what Michael Bitner, Scott Fasnacht, and Mackenzie Sorem may go on to do...unfortunately, I don't. But maybe one of them - or all three together - could create ways to prevent things like the Gulf oil spill that we will never forget.

We will each go on to do these incredible things because of the chances that our families and our teachers have given us, and that we ourselves have taken.

Classmates, do not look back on our time together at the Academy with regret or with sad remembrance of the difficulties. Remember that because of the priceless thing that is our education, we are a part of the generation that **MUST** continue to change our world for the better. Remember that there are so many less fortunate than we are, and so we must give back.

Always be aware that you have grown and matured in an intellectual environment that has nurtured you and treated you well. You have luxuries, both concrete and abstract, that you must always recognize and which you will carry with you for the rest of your life.

Your gratitude is something that each one of your family members, friends, and teachers will appreciate for the entirety of *their* lives, so give them this gift, as they are so deserving of it.

We have spent unforgettable years together - whether it has been only one or as many as fourteen. I hope that you remember my words today and look back on your time at the Academy - as well as your whole young life thus far - with the same joy with which I am remembering my own years. And pay it forward.

Thank you to my own parents, family, teachers, friends, and classmates. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to show my gratitude publicly today.

Congratulations, Class of 2010, and thank you.