

Remarks at Graduation

Woods Charter School Class of 2008

Saturday, June 7, 2008

Ladies and gentlemen of the faculty and staff, honored members of the school board, Uncle Roger, friends and family, and the class of 2008, I am honored and humbled to stand before you today.

And a little anxious.

Because if you know the class of 2008, you know that these 15 wonderful people—my friends and my brothers and sisters of the senior class—they can be a tough audience sometimes.

They are smart, independent, and determined. They are sharp, and funny, and never at a loss for words. And they have a pretty low tolerance for my sense of humor. Over the years, I've gotten pretty good at telling a joke and then getting out of the line of fire.

But I know they tease and occasionally throw things, because deep down, they love. Teachers have often commented that we are pretty mean to each other as a class, and to the outsider, I'm sure it looks that way. But after four years in this class, I can say with all honesty that those insults mean the world to me, because I know the people they come from, and I know that they really do care, even if they don't care for my puns.

And when I think about this class, and ponder how we manage to be intellectually aggressive but still "laid-back, untroubled people," I think about how we first came together as a class four years ago.

Looking back to my freshman year, I realize now that I had no idea of what I was getting myself into. I had no idea how much I would learn from my classmates, how much I would share with them, how much we would grow, and how much I would miss them when the time came for us to say goodbye.

As a freshman class, I don't think any of us fully realized what we were getting ourselves into by starting our high school careers at this wacky little school in an abandoned strip mall. But we soon made our home at Woods, and four years of shenanigans later, we are sad to be leaving.

We are thankful to be the last class to graduate from Cole Park High, and to us, Woods will always be between the Ciao Bella and Torreros, Mr. Temple's room will always be a hallway, and the toilets will always run over.

We are somewhat skeptical about what will happen to our school once it moves to its own building and Dollar General is more than a few feet away. We fear that something

will be lost in the transition, but we know that what makes Woods special can not be packed in a box and put on a truck.

In my State of the School Address, I said that Woods is not a place, but a state of mind, and I told the student body the simple truth: You my friends, you are Woods.

And the same holds true for this class.

Each graduating class is different, but they are all part of Woods. Some are outstanding academically, others are vivacious and full of life, and others, like this class, are a bit of both. I think the reason that this class has become so attached to Woods is because we feel at home here, and when I look at the Class of 2008, I see all the things that make Woods special.

In some ways we are gathered here to celebrate a double loss: the loss of our seniors, and the loss of our home for the past ten years. And while we will miss them both, we know that they cannot stay here forever. We want the Class of 2008 and Woods Charter School to go on to do great things, to write the next chapter of their lives, but because they have meant so much to us, it is hard to say goodbye.

I said goodbye to my Grandfather last fall.

The support I received from my class and my teachers and from the entire Woods community was so overwhelming, and I cannot thank you enough for all your kindness.

But as I think about that goodbye, I start to think about this goodbye. I think about the last things my Grandpa said to me, and I think about the last things I will say to you. And when I think about his advice, I think about all of you, not because I think you need it, but because I think you already live it.

As I've gotten to know each of you over the last four years, I've learned your passions, your dreams, and your plans for the rest of your lives. I've learned what ticks you off, and what makes you tick. Each of you has something you deeply care about: writing, religion, education, science, technology, art, or politics. So take hold of your future, and don't let go. Give you lives to what matters most, and everything else will follow.

Put first things first, he told me. Put first things first.

Many of us are going off to college next year, and if the rumors are true, we are really going to learn the value of a five dollar bill. It's worth a couple loads of laundry, or a gallon of gas, whichever comes first.

But I don't need to tell you that the most valuable things in life don't come with a price tag. In your lives I see your families, your friends, your hopes and dreams, and your wide open futures. So invest in what matters.

I am rich, he told. I am rich.

And to all these things I will add just this.

Love is not efficient.

To put first things first, to be rich—it is rarely fast and easy. But it is worth it.

When I look at your lives my brothers and sisters, I see these things in action. I see you putting first things first, I see you investing in what matters, and I see you doing it not because it is easy, but because it is worth it. And when I look at I your lives my brothers and sisters, it is no surprise that I remember why Woods is so special.

Because when I look at our school, I see the same thing.

As a school, we put first things first when we focus on learning over testing and community over bureaucracy. We are rich when we make do with what we have, and remember that the nicest, most expensive building in the world is worthless without the community that fills it up.

And we remember that love is not efficient everyday, because it is hard to be charter school. The things we do we do for love—the love of learning, the love of knowledge, and the love of community—and we do them even though they are neither easy nor efficient.

So to my school, carry on. Thank you for all you have taught me, all you have done for me, and remember to do what really matters.

And to the Class of 2008, my brothers and sisters, carry on. Thank you for all you have taught me, all you have done for me, and remember to do what really matters

These remarks are dedicated to my grandfather, the Revered Herschel R. Phillips.

He was a man who felt a call, and left his former life behind. He was a man poor in pocket and poor in spirit, but rich in family, friends, and faith. And he was a man of love—through schism, suffering, and time.

Grandpa, you made it home.

Andrew Phillips
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