

2017 Graduation Speech

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Importance of 42

Hi, Everybody!

My name is Mr. Powner. I'm one of Spectrum's high school science teachers. That means I've built a career out of pretending to be the most mature person in a room full of teenagers, and then dare to show them how to set things on fire, look at weird things under microscopes, dissect plants and animals, electrocute materials, dissolve things with acids, shoot lasers, and play with some of the coolest gadgets in the world; and I'm proud to still have all my fingers and both eyebrows. We'll see how next year goes.

Acknowledgements

I'm grateful to have been invited to speak to you today. I would like to take a moment to thank the many people that have worked together to help our seniors to earn their high school diplomas. Thank you to our administrators, school board members, parents, teachers, paraeducators, support staff, secretaries, nurse, lunch room helpers, maintenance persons, and every supportive member of the Spectrum community. Most of all I want to thank you, the students of this graduating class. I've occasionally joked on stressful days that education would be a lot easier without the students, but your growth is the purpose for our teaching profession, you are the reason many of us get out of bed in the morning.

Congratulations

High school graduation is a major milestone in your lives. Being a scientist, facts and measurements are important to me. For each of you to make it to graduation, you spent more than

2,000 days in school. That makes more than 15,000 hours of classes, around 900,000 minutes. You've spent about 1/3 of your life with teachers. You've spent a lot of time learning, put in a lot of work. You deserve every round of applause and each moment of celebration.

Anecdotes

As your teachers, it has been our marvelous privilege to watch you grow and mature over the past few years. We have talked with you in the halls, celebrated your good news, laughed with you about the funny parts of life, cried with you in times of tragedy, done our best to prepare you for life, reprimanded you when you needed it, met numerous times with your parents, hoped and dreamed for your futures, and prayed for each of you countless times.

We educators feel like proud parents much of the time; exasperated and exhausted parents on other occasions. We have fed you, fixed your cuts and scrapes, put an arm around your shoulders when you needed it, and have often discussed and planned how to be the most helpful to you in private meetings. You were born to other families and are cared for by many other adults, but in our minds, you are our kids. I am sure there is not one teacher/para partnership here or administrator or staff member that does not feel the same way.

We often marvel as we discuss the progress that each of you makes from year-to-year. We are in awe of your intelligence, abilities, and potential. The collection of challenges our students face, Autistic and otherwise, have proven only to be developmental delays. You are not disabled. The word "disabled" means you lack ability, that you can't do something no matter how hard you try. The charter of this school is a stubborn rejection of this notion of disability. Despite the expectations of many, we see you do the impossible every day. You grow. You learn. You dream. You succeed. We are proud of these traits in you all.

Exhortations

Before I offer my parting words of advice to our graduating seniors, I need to share some personal context with those who have not spent time in my classroom.

First, when my students get excited about a topic of a science lesson, they routinely ask numerous wonderful questions, but often I can tell they need to learn more before they are ready to understand the answers to those same questions. It's hard to help them focus their enthusiasm and teach them patience in these moments... When this happens, I smile and say to them, "42." They know what this means, but I should probably explain.

At the beginning of every school year, I tell my students that one of my favorite stories is The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, a science fiction comedy series by Douglas Adams. Within this silly adventure, a race of hyperintelligent pan-dimensional beings grow tired of all the meaning-of-life type questions posed by mortal philosophers throughout the galaxy. These mighty beings build an enormous supercomputer named Deep Thought and ask it to calculate THE Answer; the Answer to the "Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything."

After buzzing and whirring away for 7 ½ million years, Deep Thought announces to an eager gathering of philosophers that the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything is 42. When the astonished crowd demand an explanation from Deep Thought, the supercomputer responds that it had never been supplied with a specific question, but that THE Answer is in fact 42. The main characters of this delightfully strange tale then spend the rest of the story seeking the great Question that will give meaning to the Answer, 42.

I love this story because it highlights a couple of important principles. We are intelligent enough to seek deep answers to the mysteries of our existence, but we are often not yet ready to understand the answers... More importantly, great answers in life are often less important than great questions.

The second item of personal context is this: words are important to me. My students know that I love to dissect words, tracing their etymology... The modern word *science* evolved from the Latin root *scientia* which simply means “knowledge.” By this definition, all forms of knowledge are science.

Having provided the context for the meaning of the number 42 and the origins of the word *science*, I now offer my parting advice as you move forward with life after graduation.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that your education is complete. A high school diploma means that we have spent 12+ years teaching you how to go about learning on your own... From today forward, you can either take ownership of how your character and mind evolve or you can let life force you to learn the hard lessons. You have the skills and tools to accomplish your dreams in ways both great and small.

Knowing that the word *science* means “knowledge.” I challenge you all to be scientists. Be knowers of things, life-long learners. Allow your characters to evolve and grow.

Life can become dull, even offensive, if we stop moving forward, stop growing... My grandpa was a World War II field hospital medic, race car enthusiast, and twice-a-week dance hall king into his late 80s. He once told me that the secret to life is to never stop moving. I add to his advice that you must remember where you have come from.

Appreciate your past, its lessons make you who you are. Honestly embrace and take hold of your present self. Dream, and sacrifice to make those dreams reality. Never stop becoming the best possible version of yourself.

Be explorers and problem solvers. Pay attention to the people and the world around you. Learn to care enough to get involved, be stubborn and noble enough to stay involved... And in all these adventures, seek the great Questions that make life’s Answers more satisfying.

And, as any good scientist would, when you find answers, use them to improve the world. When something doesn't work, find out why, fix it, or try something new. Don't surrender because you think something is too hard... Move forward. And move forward with our blessing.

Conclusion

We believe in you... We are grateful for you... We love you... We are proud of you... We expect good things from you... Congratulations, graduating class of 2017.