



Good morning! It is such a pleasure to be here speaking to you on this graduation day, as you prepare to take your first steps into high school and the pre-adult world. I hope to do three things this morning. First, to share with you some of my memories of my time at Topeka Collegiate to illustrate the outstanding education provided to students here. Second, to encourage you to use the power of your education to improve the lives of those less fortunate than yourself and third, to share some of my experiences in my journey to improve the lives of others. It is my hope that you will take these experiences with you as you journey through life.

I have many memories of my time at Topeka Collegiate and the high quality education I received here. I came to Topeka Collegiate in second grade from a public school in Manhattan. There, I was so far advanced they thought of having me skip a grade. At Topeka Collegiate, however, I had to do some work to catch up to my classmates. My second grade teacher, Ms. Wilson made learning come alive with animals and plants in the classrooms, hands-on lessons and experiments, and always making learning fun. I am sure that everyone here at Topeka Collegiate has had teachers that do all of those things.

One of the most incredible things about being back here at Topeka Collegiate is the number of educators who are still here nearly 14 years later. Being someone who is in education, it is rare to find people who commit a lifetime of high quality service to one school. And, as part of my professional experience, I've traveled and evaluated teachers and schools across the country, and I can tell you, that Topeka Collegiate is a top tier school that provides outstanding educational experiences to its students in science, math, language arts, music and art.

On my 8th grade graduation day, I was given the "Excellence in Science Award" and I have to give tribute to an amazing science teacher – Mr. Larry Miller. While no longer with Topeka Collegiate I have to believe that his legacy lives on and that I'm sure you've had equally outstanding science educators. From Mr. Miller I learned to create hypotheses and design experiments to evaluate those hypotheses. I had the opportunity to build my own invention in the invention convention and present countless topics at the annual science fair. He gave me feedback to help me grow as a student and person. He also gave me one of my first leadership opportunities – leading a science summer camp under his guidance. All these experiences have developed me into the person I am today and those

lessons stick with me. These are skills I'm sure you too have taken away in your time here and that will continue to serve you well and help you grow.

I was fortunate enough to experience History Day, under another wonderful educator, Laura Strauss, which was one of the most valuable and memorable educational experiences I've had. The rigor and challenge that I faced both years that I did History Day prepared me to face similar academic challenges in both high school and college. One year I had the opportunity to write and perform a play as Andrew Jackson's wife. A second year I researched the diary of Anne Frank, including the use of a primary source – a letter from Meip Gies, a woman who played a role in hiding Anne from the Germans. Every year, when I read about what Topeka Collegiate students have done in History Day, I am blown away by the thoughtfulness and critical thinking. That amount of work, growth, focus, and critical thought set me up for success in high school, college and beyond as I'm sure it will you.

One of my most memorable teachers at my time here, who always stands out in my mind, is Mrs. Hoyt. I remember her class as being a safe place where I felt valued as a mathematician, and made real world connections between math and life. I walked out of Topeka Collegiate being confident in my skills as a mathematician and more than two years ahead of most of my peers in high school. While many women I know say that they are just not good at math I have always had confidence in my math abilities and I attribute a large part of that to Mrs. Hoyt. And although I don't use math on a regular basis, when I sat down to take the Praxis Exam to become certified as a teacher, I found myself singing Mrs. Hoyt's "Area is PI R Squared" song to remember how to complete simple math problems. Thank you Ms. Hoyt for years later, helping me be successful on my career path. I know you have taught these 8th graders similar lessons that will stick with them. Please give her a round of applause.

I recognize these teachers both because I believe teaching should be our most valued and celebrated profession and also in hopes that you will reflect on the wonderful teachers you've had here. Be confident in the fact that the things you learned here, will stay with you and take you far. Congratulations to each of you on the hard work you've done to be here and to all the people who have helped you get here, teachers, parents, family members, and other supporters. Please give them a round of applause. I know that graduating from Topeka Collegiate is a lot of hard work, effort and certainly something to be celebrated. However, it is the first step in a long line of graduations from high school, college, and post graduate degrees.

I recently spoke at Topeka High School's graduation and my thought process and speech were very different than what I planned for today. While I received a unique education from Topeka High School and while it is a school full of rich opportunities especially in music, sports, honors and AP classes and other extracurricular activities, the reality is, many students there for a variety of reasons, will not obtain a college degree. Because of the high quality education I received at Topeka Collegiate and because of the benefit of my family's background, college has always been an assumption in my life as I'm sure it is in most of yours. For you, I'm sure the decision will be which college to attend and what your post-graduate career holds. So, I take this as my opportunity, to encourage you to use the privilege you've had – in receiving this excellent education, to do your part in making the world a better place. In my experience, making the world a better place makes you a better, happier, and more well-rounded person and I believe that it is our duty as human beings to leave the world better than we found it.

While that may seem large and abstract, there are many, many ways of making the world a better place. For you, at this age, it may look like choosing to volunteer somewhere – a hospital, the library, or a soup kitchen. Be active in your church or synagogue youth group or in clubs at your high school that have a positive impact on the world. These are all meaningful experiences that will shape you as a person and also build a resume for your college applications.

In a few years, you'll be ready for your first summer jobs. I myself was a lifeguard for many years with the Topeka Public Pools. And while mostly the job was a blast – hanging out in the sun with other high school students – reflecting back, I know that for me, it was my first steps into a life of service. As a lifeguard, you are a public servant, protecting the lives of people who swim in public pools. After Topeka High, I attended Grinnell College, a small liberal arts school that is focused on living a life of service. There I was drawn to being a Sociology major with a minor in Gender and Women's Studies because I was interested in studying our society and how our lives are often determined and guided by factors such as race, gender, and class.

When I graduated from college, I knew I wanted to make the world a better place. And so I found my way to the Teach For America program, a program that places college graduates in low-income areas to teach for two years and then charges them to use their experience to continue making a positive impact on education from all sectors of society. I have to tell you that it is the single most important decision I made in my life. I highly suggest the experience to any of you who, eight years from now, answer this call to have a positive impact on the world.

There I discovered firsthand the disparity that exists in education in this country. I taught in an elementary school in Camden, NJ which was at the time, the most dangerous city in the country. I was of service to families who were affected by gangs, drugs, violence, and lack of access to health care. The students in my first grade class came in 2-3 years behind. They should come in reading simple stories, however, many of my students did not know their letters let alone know how to read. And though it was an enormous challenge, my students all made over a year's worth of progress, many leaving on grade level. I was able to improve my kid's lives by giving them an opportunity for an excellent education.

As much as I felt the impact of my experience in Camden, I knew that I wanted to be part of a greater movement. While I made a significant impact on the lives of my students in Camden, and am still in touch with several to this day, a year in my classroom was not enough to significantly change the trajectory of their lives.

And so I found my way to KIPP, a national network of charter schools that work to provide an excellent education for at risk students. I've spent the last four years with KIPP DC, first as a teacher and now as a Principal. This past July I opened my school, KIPP DC: Grow Academy, with 100 Pre-Kindergarten children. I am incredibly honored to walk through the doors of my own school every day and work to provide an excellent education for my students. I know that the work my teachers do, will change my students' lives, putting them on the path to college, a career, and a life full of choices, and away from a path of drugs, gangs, violence, and low paying jobs. I wholeheartedly believe that all children, regardless of where they live, deserve an excellent education. Whether white or black, from inner city or suburbs it is our job as Americans to ensure that all people have access to an high quality school experience.

My job makes me a better, happier, person and I know that the work I do with my students will change the trajectory of their life. I share my life experiences with you to hopefully encourage you to take up a service project or volunteer in the next years and to begin to consider a life of service whether as a doctor, nurse, police officer, fire chief, teacher, or some who works in the non-profit sector. I charge you to find a way either as a career or on the side, to use the educational privilege you've had, to make a positive impact on the world.

I leave you with one of my most favorite quotes: **Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.**

I hope that each of you will join a committed group of citizens to help change the world, as you are the future of our planet. Congratulations on taking your first steps into the adult world.