

## Commencement Address

Thank you so much for having me. It's truly an honor to be here. I think the last time I spoke in front of this many people was at my own TCS graduation, where I gave the class address. In that speech, inspired by Hillary Clinton's book *It Takes a Village*, I talked about how it takes an entire village to raise a child and noted how fortunate I felt to have been raised by Topeka Collegiate. Now, having had exposure to many more villages, so to speak, I am firmer in my belief that that's true and I'm thrilled that my family has been able to stay a part of this village for almost 25 years.

So as you know, I graduated from Topeka Collegiate 12 years ago, and since then I've graduated from two high schools and college and just about two weeks ago I graduated law school, and each time I've experienced basically the same feelings—feelings you're probably experiencing yourselves right now. It's like this: you and your classmates have been climbing this mountain for so long—noticing with delight that the top of the mountain has been slowly getting clearer and clearer and more and more within your reach. And today you've finally arrived after years of hard work and you're all jumping up and down and cheering and getting awards and giving awards and eating cake and experiencing this weird mixture of happiness and pride at getting here and sadness at having to leave and the end of the era—and then, at every graduation, we all catch sight of something that takes a little bit of the spring out of our steps and that's the next mountain—the next *huge* challenge and suddenly we're not thinking about how monumental today is and how great it feels at the top of the mountain but about how to get to the top of that next mountain. And that's scary and stressful and it's something I've been thinking about a lot recently myself—having climbed a few more mountains than you guys but, like you, certainly having some serious ones ahead of me—so hopefully you'll find it helpful if I share some mountain-climbing pointers, so to speak, that I've picked up along the way—keeping in mind that I know nothing about actually climbing mountains.

Before I do that, though, I want to say a few things to two groups of you:

First, I want to congratulate those among you whose accomplishments have been recognized in recent days by the Topeka collegiate community. It's a tremendous accomplishment. You deserve to be proud, as do your parents. But let me suggest this: treat those awards as a recognition of *potential*, not of ultimate success, and keep striving to live up to your potential. I can tell you this: success in high school or college, or better yet, real-life, is a billion times sweeter, so let that propel you.

To those among you whose unique attributes and successes have not been acknowledged with as much fanfare, I have this to say to you: I'm one of you guys. I got like zero awards at

my Topeka Collegiate graduation. I wanted the Mac Reeves award soooo badly and I didn't get it—and I didn't get the art award or the PE award or the math award or any other big award. And it hurt a little. But guess what: I still got into an amazing college and graduated with Honors and have some stellar opportunities awaiting me now as a new lawyer. So while Middle School awards may be a recognition of potential, they aren't a very accurate predictor of success.

What that means is this: Whether you leave here with a pile of awards and high honors or none (like me), you will all start high school the very same way—as giant ball of potential. Don't get me wrong: I'm absolutely not saying that all you've done is for naught—all of your hard work gives you a tremendous leg up—I know that each of you has developed the enthusiasm and capacity to be the biggest balls of potential your high schools have ever seen. What I'm saying is this: take advantage of the tremendous opportunity a new beginning and changed circumstances present to go into high school and work your tails off and enjoy the heck out of it and leave knowing that if high school had a Mac Reeves award and a character counts award and all the other awards, you'd be a strong contender for a whole bunch of them.

But Topeka Collegiate and our parents haven't taught us how to think so that we can do well in high school and go to a great college and be rich and some day get names on the next TCS gym (although I'm sure they wouldn't mind if those things happened). They've taught us to think because they think it will enrich our lives in meaningful and immediate ways. I bet if each one of you asked everyone here today what they want for you, they'd say the same thing: happiness.

And let me say this about happiness before I return to my ultimate point: here's what I think is the greatest predictor of happiness in high school: the kids that enjoy it aren't the ones that are most popular or even the ones that are most academically successful. The people that are happy in high school are the ones that were confident—the ones that didn't let the pettiness and social tyranny of high school get under their skin. It's not easy in high school to be one of the confident ones when your voice is cracking and your skin is exploding with zits, but I think that if you can muster the strength to believe in yourself—and more importantly to truly know yourself by your own definition and not that of your peers—you can have the confidence it takes to excel in high school in the way that matters most. Being confident enough to be comfortable in your own skin—to say despite your constant efforts to improve that, you'd change nothing about yourself isn't cocky—that's just really, really cool.

So as I was saying—that happiness is the ultimate goal of education—our parents and teachers have burdened us with the pressure that comes with academic privilege because

they believe, in all their wisdom, that ultimately, the benefits of a thoughtful life are worth the stress and responsibilities it brings.

So use your bright futures for their intended purposes—to choose the next mountain you climb not by which one is shortest or which one seems to end in a pot of gold (like the perfect college), but by which one you think will make you happiest. In high school and over the summer and even in college, though its years away, study what you love.

But don't JUST put your head down and study what you love: a good mountain climber—at least metaphorically because, again, I know nothing about real mountain climbing—doesn't chart his or her course from the base of the mountain—a good mountain climber is exploring all the way up the mountain. So although which mountain you choose from here is important, what's more important is that you don't let that choice limit you—that you always keep looking around and pursuing other opportunities as they arise. To goal-oriented kids like us, finding yourself distracted by other paths can be scary, but it can also be the first step on a better path. It has been my experience that no amount of hiking or education or effort is a loss if it leads you to something more rewarding—even if it makes life a little less convenient.

My first day at Brown, the president of the University said that if we left with the same major we'd come in with, we would have failed to take advantage of the opportunities the school presented to us. I entered college pretty sure I wanted to study socio-cultural anthropology and ended up finding a major I didn't know existed—one that fit my interests perfectly. But Josh tells me you'll be much more interested in my husband's career than mine. He entered college pretty sure he wanted to study philosophy—and he ultimately did, but not without taking courses in Russian Literature, Chinese history, and the Astronomy to be sure. And then, just as he was about to graduate, decided that he'd rather explore music as a career. And while now he works as a composer of music for TV commercials and the front-man of a rock band, I can tell you that he has absolutely no regrets about studying philosophy all those years.

What I mean to illustrate is this: hypothesizing about what you want to do—what to study in high school or college or as a career—is good, but Topeka Collegiate has taught you that a theory is better than a hypothesis. You can't know you're on the path that's right for you if you don't know you like it more than the alternatives, so even if today you know you want to be a doctor or a lawyer or an actor or a writer, I advise you to treat that as a hypothesis. Work towards that goal while exploring others—always thinking critically about both.

And though I know my mountain-climbing metaphor is probably getting old, I'll press it one step further: don't climb mountains for the sake of climbing mountains—if you do you'll

never be satisfied. Rather, climb because you enjoy it: enjoy your work, enjoy the views, enjoy breathing the fresh air. And while you're up there, enjoy the beauty that surrounds you.

And you won't just like it because it's beautiful. TCS teaches us about art and music and other sources of beauty at young age, but they don't let us just sit back and enjoy the act of listening or singing or observing or creating. Presumably, someone much wiser than us thought it was important to teach us *about* the art we were appreciating: to distinguish a waltz from song written in 4/4 time, or a Manet from a Monet—not just so we can sound smart but because understanding those things unlocks their beauty. This doesn't just apply to art and music, though—my cousin recently said that you couldn't possibly understand the beauty of physics—which he studies—unless you understand the math. Curiosity and appreciation of beauty are like a never-ending cycle of awesome life enrichment.

So while you're forging whatever path you choose, appreciate the beauty that surrounds you—because the photography exhibit outside your biology classroom will be all the more beautiful if you understand how cool the evolution of the flowers in the photographs are. And your biology class will be a lot more interesting if you're actually curious about how the heck those flowers got so awesome.

So for those of you that zoned out over the last 10 minutes—and Josh, that better not have been you—have confidence in your potential, choose your course wisely but treat it like a hypothesis, and appreciate the beauty in your work and in the world that surrounds you. Also, if I may impart 5 more pieces of advice before I conclude:

- 1) As appealing as it is, a diet of exclusively high school vending machine food is a bad idea.
- 2) Don't do anything you'd be embarrassed to tell your younger siblings (that look up to you) you did.
- 3) Be nice.
- 4) Volunteer: it feels really good, teaches you a lot, makes your parents incredibly proud, and makes the world a better place.
- 5) Thank your parents, your teachers, and all of the other amazing people in your lives.

So, class of 2010: Congratulations, keep climbing hard, and don't forget to enjoy the view.

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