

Katherine Garlinghouse
Commencement Address
Topeka Collegiate School
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Thank you, Mrs. Hoyt, for such a wonderful introduction...and thank you to Mary Beth Marchiony, all the teachers, parents, grandparents, siblings, and of course you, the graduates for inviting me to come speak today. It is an honor to be back at Topeka Collegiate.

I have to be honest, as I was reflecting on what to say today, and I was thinking about how long it has been since I was in your shoes – that’s a little scary to think about, really – I wasn’t sure that I really had anything to offer as advice for such an incredible group of students. It took a while, but as I was thinking about the path I’ve taken, I realized that many of the core things that have brought me to where I am today are things that I actually first learned at Topeka Collegiate.

I know that may sound a bit odd to you right now, so let me share a couple of stories that will help explain.

The first story begins a long time ago, with an important rite of passage for all Topeka Collegiate Students – History Day. I chose the path of writing papers for my History Day experiences, as I’m sure many of you did as well. The process of writing a paper – as it turns out – requires what seems like endless amounts of research and writing....I wrote, I re-wrote, I re-wrote again and then....I started over. At some point, I was pretty sure it was going to be the end of me. I thought it was going to completely overwhelm me – and at times it did. But, by some miracle, I finished. It wasn’t anything that catapulted me to History Day honors, and I’m pretty sure my treatise on Peter the Great has been long forgotten – at least I *really hope* it has – but looking back, the point of the exercise was simple, but endlessly important. Never give up. Ever.

If you want to do something and you think it is the right thing: never quit. It takes courage to tackle something you’ve never done before, to decide to go for it, and then jump in to see what happens.

That same refusal to quit that I learned right here has helped guide me through high school, college and my professional career. It prompted me to take the challenging classes at Topeka High, to go to college somewhere outside my comfort zone and to say yes to the professional opportunities that would take me to the far corners of the globe.

I couldn’t have possibly known it at the time, but that History Day paper I wrote, along with the language lessons and encouragement from another one of my Topeka Collegiate teachers – Mrs. Franklin – sparked a longer interest in Eastern Europe – one that I followed to Topeka High, and on to the University of Pennsylvania. It led me to study abroad in both Moscow and Warsaw while I was in college, and to work in a field where this background has been remarkably helpful at the strangest and most amazing times. A conversation starter with the mayor of a small town in Western Ukraine. A strategy session with a PR agency in Lithuania. It’s amazing the knowledge you draw from throughout your life and where your inspiration will come from. Take the hard classes, learn the lessons, never give up.

I can't talk about never giving up without also spending a little time talking about the mistakes you'll make along the way – there will be plenty of them. Everything you do is a learning opportunity and a chance for you to get better going forward. Sometimes as you try new things, you'll learn there are things you don't enjoy – like High School Chemistry was for me. I remember being in AP Chemistry at Topeka High and knowing – I will never be a chemist. And, and it is entirely possible that I might blow something up today. It was hard, and I didn't really like it, but from that experience, I had my first taste of the importance of friends who are good at things you are not....and how to be in a study group – something critically important for my college experience, and something that continues to be important every day professionally. But back to chemistry....because while I might have needed my friend to help me study for Chemistry, my friends needed me to help them with Statistics and European History. Tradeoffs like those will be important forever. No one is good at everything, and everyone does better when they work together.

This leads me to my next story – people. The people you meet and the relationships you have are critical to everything you'll do. From the sports, clubs and activities you pursue in high school and college, to the people you'll meet professionally, relationships make the world go round, and everyone you meet will be part of your story.

A few months ago, I caught up with another Topeka Collegiate alum in New York. She is in the process of working on a Masters degree and put a call out on Facebook for people who could help her with some background on the energy industry. It was wonderful to catch up with her, answer as many questions as I could, and hear about all the amazing places life had taken her over the past several years. While we hadn't seen each other in years, we were able to talk like old friends.

When I graduated from Topeka High and left for college, I was one of only 3 people from the entire state of Kansas that arrived in Philadelphia to start classes at the University of Pennsylvania. Let me tell you, that was intimidating. Even though I had made a somewhat similar transition in going from Topeka Collegiate to Topeka High, it felt different and it was terrifying and I wasn't really sure what to expect. Fortunately, I found out quickly that everyone was in a similar boat. And, just like transitioning from Topeka Collegiate to Topeka High, it was time to meet new people and make new friends.

And last weekend, I was back in Philadelphia at my 10-year college reunion. I caught up with friends whose lives have taken them to all corners of the world both geographically and professionally. Doctors, lawyers, bankers, consultants, legislators, inventors and educators – we all share a common bond that makes us friends first. And through those relationships, you have a network for life that is like a constantly growing encyclopedia, or I guess, more like Wikipedia in real life. People to see when you travel and people to call when you need advice – these types of friends are the ones who will always be there for you, and they will all start off as strangers.

People matter – whether it's advice on a major life decision, a restaurant recommendation, or someone to talk to after a bad day, the people in your life are everything, and you can never have too many friends. You'll absolutely meet people along the way who will challenge this, but the ability to respect everyone, learn from everyone and stay positive will carry you far.

Which brings me to my last story, and one of the other important lessons that started here at Topeka Collegiate - curiosity.

One of the very first things I had to do when I started working for Chevron was to spend 2 months managing a gas station. Talk about a humbling experience – and one that my brother still refers to ‘that time you were hazed by corporate America’ – I was at a station in downtown San Francisco, in a questionable neighborhood. In the time I was there, I was involved with a corporate audit, firing an employee for stealing, hiring a new employee and handling maintenance issues that can only be described as gross. I didn’t enjoy running a gas station – and in many ways this story is also about refusing to give up – but, I realized the uniqueness of the experience, and chose to dig deeper and see what I could learn.

In those 2 months I was curious about everything, I was able to get a full understanding of the customers who shopped at our station, the challenges our convenience store employees face on a daily basis and get a serious reminder of the value of good people. I learned more in those 2 months than I would have in a year of reading annual reports and taking online training classes.

A few years later, and in a different role with Chevron, a project took me to our operations in a remote part of Indonesia. Three flights, two busses and a helicopter later, I made it from San Francisco to meet up with my coworker in our remote camp on the island of Sumatra. I spent a couple of weeks learning about the challenges of the surrounding area – protecting the Sumatran tigers and elephants that often wandered into oil field operations, the need to generate our own electricity, and then the really serious issues – like, sometimes the internet just stops working.

But, spending the time there, getting to know the history of the region, the political background, the economic background and the cultural background helped me in that project, but also now I bring that knowledge forward in everything else I do.

Ask ‘why?’; Understand the background; see it for yourself – all different ways of saying, be curious. The world is a pretty amazing place, and there is no shortage of opportunity. It is not enough just to be smart. In today’s world, you have to be willing to dig deeper, work harder and see the things that other people might miss. Don’t be afraid of not knowing the answer. Half the fun is figuring it out.

Thank you so much for letting me join in your celebration today. I know you are going to go on to do wonderful things. As you get ready to leave Topeka Collegiate and move into your next chapter, I hope these thoughts will be helpful to you along the way: be curious, be good to people, and never – ever – give up.

Congratulations graduates!