

Thank you – I’m extremely humbled to speak on behalf of our amazing faculty – one I feel so grateful and blessed to be a part of – Although I must admit I feel a little out of place here on the north end of the gym...I’m used to being in my comfort zone over there on that sideline...stomping up and down...encouraging the officials to make a better call...I need the band here to heckle the opposing team to make me feel at home...thanks band.

Seriously though, I’m particularly honored to be with you class of 2017 because you hold a truly special place in my heart. We’ve watched you grow from youngsters who bust through our doors 6 years ago into incredible young adults who are ready to bust back out these doors and tackle the world with the same enthusiasm, grit and grace that you’ve exhibited since you arrived. Your presence has forever changed this place.

When I look at you I see all the unique, valuable gifts each of you brought to make this a special place. Yet on this culminating day to celebrate you the individual, you are all dressed alike for the one thing that forever binds you together – the 2017 graduating class of West Side. For all your differences, your common experiences make you a west sider – studying into late hours (maybe because you procrastinated too long to start that paper), celebrating multiple championships - too many to account here - with the west side community, going out to lunch with your friends – I told one of my former colleagues from another school that we have open lunch, and she said “you let them go out for lunch and they come back?” I said, “Yea, and almost on time!” Except for when they try to get to Chik-Fil-a and back - stay clear of the parking lot when they’re coming in on two wheels...not the safest place. But that’s west side – this is a unique place. Most schools need 27 years to get 27 valedictorians!

Today is a very bittersweet day for all of us. Bittersweet, my favorite word that describes all the great moments in life. Parents I know you feel a bit of sadness that your baby has reached this milestone, yet I’m sure there is also sense of great joy they are ready to move on to great things. Job well done parents.

Graduates I know you’ve looked forward to the moment when you walk out those doors the final time – how sweet it will be...but I have to tell you there’s a little bitterness that will come with this sweetness because the next time you walk back in, it won’t be the same. It can’t be. For in every great moment, there will always be that bitterness... that’s part of what makes the moment great. In every triumph,

there is the letdown of closure – when you feel like “I wish this feeling could last forever” but it can’t. That is life.

But the beauty of the dichotomy is that for every difficult time that would be described as bitter, there will be sweetness that comes with it. Sweetness in the form of lessons learned, the strength you gain through the tough experience, or the kindness of others who help you through the hard time.

Last year I was in awe of the grace and strength shown by so many of you as struggled to come to grips with the loss of classmate. And while that was such a difficult time, so much good – 4 houses built for people in need- has sprung from “one more”. You rallied around a phrase that Christian lived by but really you rallied around each other. The most powerful thing is that it was not just words taped above his weight machine, it was the way he lived his life. To hear his teammates and coaches describe how he played football or ran track, was exactly how I would describe him as a chemistry student in my class. He strived to be the best version of himself no matter what he was doing, and it brought out the best in those around him, including me as his teacher.

So class of 2017, we give you one more challenge as you walk out those doors one final time - be the best version of you so you can bring out the best in others. Almost every week I present a challenge of the week to my students – things that don’t necessarily have anything to do with chemistry, but maybe can help navigate life a little. Things as simple as pick up trash, get 8 hours of sleep (laugh), or a little more complex like don’t talk about someone unless he or she is present, or tell someone how grateful you are to them. All the right things we’ve been taught to do, but is too often overlooked in the busyness of life. Most of the challenges fall into the category of “leave a place better than you found it.” Well class of 2017, if we look at your last four years like a webassign question (sorry I just couldn’t help myself) you’ve had four submissions to get this right. Your freshman year, let’s be honest, was more like a guess. Your sophomore you started to figure it out, show good work, but you still didn’t get it right. (Except for maybe Arjun) Then by the time you were juniors, you really made your presence known in our school and almost got it, except for the sig figs...those little details that separate the good from the great. But I’m proud to say, on your final submission this year as senior class, you really have made this a better place than what you found it. Thank you graduates. Bust through those doors and go bring out the best in the world!