

Salutatorian Nicholas Cowan: “A Work in Progress”

Thank you Mr. Hoffer and welcome Dr. Schartner, Board of Education, Sayville High School faculty and staff, alumni, family and friends, and good morning to the class of 2015. If you have not realized yet, we made it. Before I begin I would like to once again thank all those going off to serve our country in a branch of our armed forces, so a round of applause for them. I would like also to acknowledge anyone who asked for a shout out, I left a blank space with the words “insert name here” in my speech just for you, so consider yourselves recognized.

Now, I must admit that I have been planning this speech for the past four years. Both of my brothers, who are here today, each stood at this same podium and gave his own speech, so you can imagine there are a number of expectations on me today. I have to be inspirational but not cliché, profound but not boring, and funny but not awkward. Most of all I need to fulfill the two basic requirements of a great commencement speech: to tell you how bright your future is and to explain to you the importance of failure along the way usually with some mention of Dr. Seuss thrown in for good measure. And can I also recognize before I begin how ironic this is right now that I am salutatorian, most known for my academics, never played a single sport in my life yet, perhaps my most memorable moment will take place here on the hallowed football field? Anyway, I’ve decided to talk to you all about something between the extremes of success and failure, a little something I like to call uncertainty.

I would like you to all close your eyes for a moment...imagine your younger selves when you were entering your first day of kindergarten. You were wearing your nicest clothes (including your light up Heelys of course), you were only 3 feet 9 inches tall, give or take, and your backpack was filled with your first binders, power ranger or puppy folders, and crazy colorful erasers that you would never actually use but which you thought looked cool. What was running through your small underdeveloped mind? I’m sure you all had some anxiety and uncertainty in this moment as you looked around the room, clutching your favorite webkinz stuffed animal tightly to your chest, and realized that you didn’t know anyone. I mean, it is hard enough to care for a Tamagotchi, let alone try to make real human friends.

Now, fast-forward a few years to middle school. Your hormones just started to kick in and you thought you were a hot shot with your flip phone, skinny jeans, Jonas Brother’s shirt, and arm covered in silly bands. It is not until you reach high school when you recognize how messed up those few years were, and of course how ABSOLUTELY UNLUCKY our class was. If you went to Sunrise, your fifth grade trip consisted of sitting on a boat that never left the dock; maybe you still hold some grudges for missing out on Medieval Times, having it pour every day at Frost Valley, or getting lost in the woods for many hours on a waterfall hike with Dr. Schartner; and although our Physics Trip was planned twice, we never actually made it to Six Flags. But then again, we did miss out on midterms twice, so I guess that kind of makes up for it.

What can be said about high school? It was four of the most challenging years of our lives, and, contrary to popular belief, there were no flash mobs of people singing on tables at lunch like in High School Musical. It was during these years when we learned the true meaning of addiction ... through such apps as Flappy Bird, Trivia Crack, and Clash of Clans. And, although you may only know of one, in the past 17 or 18 years, we have survived upwards of 27 predicted apocalypses. There were many times during these years when we couldn’t be happier and there were times, like after the losses of one of our truly great friends and a teacher we loved and respected, when we thought that things simply could not get any worse. Now, flash-forward one more time and find yourselves sitting in a sea of purple and gold

all together on a football field listening to some speech at your high school graduation. Now open your eyes.

I'm hoping that as you went through that mind opening flash through the past 13 years of our lives you came to an epiphany. If not, well, that's why I'm here. If I were to guess, I would say that few of us could have ever pictured ourselves here today with the thoughts we have now. So much has changed. I'm sure that what you wanted to be when you were in elementary school is not the same plan you actually have now. Our favorite bands have changed, our favorite games have changed, our friends have changed, WE are overall much different people. And this is a good thing, I mean if we were all still our kindergarten selves, we would look pretty silly in these huge gowns.

But now we are entering the next stage of our lives: the post high school world of college, work or service. And I'm sure the number one thing on our minds is: what happens next? Where do I go from here? And this is where the uncertainty comes into play because I honestly don't know. People tell us our whole lives we need a plan. For most of us, that plan is to go to college, to graduate, to find a stable job and to work until we can retire. Well, I'm here to tell you that this perfect linear plan is unrealistic and to be honest, stupid. About 80% of students in the US change their major at least once. On average, college students change their major at least 3 times over the course of their college career. Moreover, the average worker currently holds 10 different jobs before the age forty, and even this number is expected to increase.

But, many people will tell us that if we don't have a plan, we will never accomplish our goals. But what if our goals are more generalized and intangible? To be happy, to laugh every day, to experience love...and loss, to feel alive. Where do we go with goals like that? There is no course in college called intro to happiness. You can't major in laughter. This idea was best emphasized by the famous singer John Lennon when he said "When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment,

I told them they didn't understand life."

People correlate being uncertain with something bad: fear is bad, failure is bad, uncertainty is bad. But it's not...it's life. We fear the unknown more than anything else and we are about to step into one of life's biggest unknowns: taking charge of our lives and choosing the path we will go down toward our future. I must say that the lessons we were taught this year did not make this future seem very promising. In economics, we were taught that we are entering a world of unemployment and recession where our jobs will be outsourced or replaced by technology and our skills will be outdated before we can even use them; in government we were taught how our politics are corrupt and divisively partisan; and if you took environmental science, we were taught how our planet, as a whole, is dying. There are more problems we need to face today than ever before, and we are the solution.

However, I am not sending you out today with the goals of finding the cure for cancer or ending all wars. That would be great, but I am sending you out with simple goals to be happy, to laugh, to love, to live, because if we all knew how to be happy with ourselves, if we could always find a reason to laugh even during the worst times, if we could learn to love and live with everyone, and if we would always stand up for what we knew was right, there would be no need for wars, suffering, and unhappiness. I have already seen a spark in our generation, even personally myself; it is a spark of acceptance, a spark of love, a spark of knowing what is right and how to counter what is wrong. I ask of you all today, as you

enter this world of uncertainty and the unknown, trying to determine that unique path towards your future successes, do not lose that spark.

So, to the class of 2015, here is my #1 piece of advice: don't worry about what life has in store for you, you can't control where the cards fall so be happy. Be happy where you are and who you are, right now. For example, you are right now sitting in the blazing sun hoping for me to stop talking and, I'll admit, in a few years you won't remember what I said, heck I won't even remember...but we will always remember how we FELT, so soak it in. My second most important piece of advice is to be grateful for our friends, our family, the people who helped us get to this point, the people we love and don't want to ever be without because these are the people who will be riding the rollercoaster of life with us. Life is a work in progress, so if you ever come to those two roads which diverge in a yellow wood uncertain of which to take, consider them both but be sure not to choose based on which seems to have been trodden more black. Instead choose based on the aspects of the path itself: the light spots, the dark spots, the twists and turns, and the uncertainty of where it leads, and never forget that life will constantly make more twists, more turns, and an infinite number of paths to take. That will make all the difference. Congratulations class of 2015, thank you for your time, and don't forget to stay poised!