

Baccalaureate: Kelly Welsh Urges Seniors to Reach Out to Others

In one of Thetford Academy's special traditions, seniors each year elect one esteemed TA teacher to present the Baccalaureate Address. The Class of 2017 chose social studies and psychology teacher Kelly Welsh to deliver this year's address. Below are Kelly's remarks, as presented during Baccalaureate on June 4, 2017, at the First Congregational Church of Thetford:

Good evening colleagues, trustees, family and friends, and Thetford Academy's graduating class of 2017. It's a privilege to represent the TA faculty, and particularly, your wonderful senior team – Dawn D, Karen H, Jane C, Greg M and Karyn N. Thank you, seniors, for this great honor.

Your class is very special to all of us:

We should have known that we were in for a unique ride way back when, on what was supposed to be your first day of 7th grade, and instead, Tropical Storm Irene gave us a snow day—in August. It was as though nature itself was trying to send us a sign that things were going to be a little different from that day on. And you are that special class that thinks that Mystic Seaport is the US capitol, and you never stopped thanking Mr. Deffner for that. If you remember nothing else about this speech, please know that you've made a lasting impression on all of us at TA, and that you'll always be welcome back.

This week has been long in the making for you and for everyone who loves you. And while the focus this week is on you, and your accomplishments, I ask you to think about a teacher or two who helped you along the way. I have the joy of working with older students, so I get to know you just as you're preparing to launch. But many of the teachers who've played a critical role in you becoming you are those who helped you into snowsuits, and helped you learn to read and subtract, who helped you to navigate that awkward thing we call middle school. So please, seek out a few teachers at TA and elsewhere, and thank them. Your teachers hope to make a difference and will love to learn that for you, they did.

In addition to your favorite teachers, please join me now in thanking the people who have loved you all along, even in those moments when you weren't sure that anyone could, your family and friends here today—and I would also like to acknowledge the families who are about to graduate their last, or only, TA student. Thank you, TA families, for sharing your amazing students with us, for supporting their growth, and for helping to make TA a special community and a great place to teach.

While most of you seniors arrive here after 18 years of steadfast support from a loving family, I would also like to acknowledge those of you who are about to graduate despite

a family that did not always come through for you. So for those of you who had to grow up fast in order to make it this milestone, we know, and we are especially proud of you.

As you have probably noticed, the class of 2017 means a lot to me. For eight years, I was a junior class advisor, and there are many great things about that, but it meant eight Mountain Days on Mount Ascutney, a lovely but steep uphill walk in the woods with lots of whining and absolutely no view until the top, and it also meant eight years of supporting kids through a certain loss on Founders Day. I wanted a new mountain, and I wanted to be a winner. So I bet on the class of 2017, and when you moved up, so did I. So let's just say that I loved hiking Mt. Moosilauke with you, but now there are members of the class of 2018 who wonder aloud if I am the curse of Founders Day, and they are begging me to go back to advising juniors next year.

This is a class that has made history at TA, and as you move on to the wider world, I would like to take a few moments to share some of the memories that will long remain.

We will remember:

- Your accomplishments in theater, and music, and visual arts, in community service, in sports and in the classroom, too numerous to list.
- The awesome Hartland girls: Ella, Hannah and both Abbys, and how much you all added to TA;
- When Ruby and Danny loved us, almost every Wednesday morning.
- Some impressive cases of senioritis—Josie needed to be quarantined by fall of junior year, and while Nilla may have been the last to catch it, when it hit, it hit hard.
- Saying goodbye to Sage.
- How you welcomed guests and newcomers, and how Moriah, the newest member of the class of 2017, stepped up and became a leader.
- Those of you who set and met big goals in athletics, like Caleb, Erik, Noah Stommel, and Matt Leib—who I understand has offered to power lift the bleachers, with all of you on them, while you sing Thetford We Revere Thee on Friday.
- And those of you, like Ashley and Triton, who will devote the next stage of your lives to serve our country.

I'll remember:

- How Katelynn managed to be stylish, everyday.
- The most amazing 6 minutes of high school sports ever, thanks to Regan, Izzy, Emily, Taylor, Dahlia, Nicolette, Grace, Molly, and their younger teammates.
- The seniors who created an after school senior lounge in the annex—Christian, Holly, Jacob, Jade, Janos, Justin, Chris, Abby L, and Ian, occasionally accompanied by a man in a banana suit, sometimes bearing a cake—the one and only Greg Allen Bananington.

- When Felix, and Raphie, and then Erik, made the girls swoon at the Mr. TA Pageant.
- Raphie's impression of Madame, and Madame's forgiveness.
- Inseparable and loyal friends—Samanthas short and tall, Lydia and Emma Dunnett, Maggie and Reshma; that bromance called Silas Noah and Kai; Lauren, Emily, Grace—and Regan, Dahlia and Izzy; Danny and Lindsay.
- The night that Camp Billings became a beautiful, formal venue, then by 9:30 there was a Cinderella moment and nearly everyone ran away from the ball.
- Noah Perry and the Mr. TA dance performance we simply can't unsee.
- Hyla perched in the back of the classroom with a grin and a notepad full of potentially dangerous quotes if taken out of context.
- Shayne and those headphones—what were you listening to all these years anyway? And Connor, forever hooded, except for the day you brought your wonderful grandpa to class.
- Those of you who'd rather be hunting, like the aptly named Hunter, and Dillon who filled the margins of his history work with anatomically correct drawings of deer.
- How Max never ran out of interesting things to say.
- Parker, a man of few words but who doesn't miss much.
- So much Vaseline.
- Hayes and his awesome baseball presentation, when he taught us that in the olden days, you could throw the ball at a player to get him out (maybe permanently).
- Triton, his ready smile and the Ford jacket that doubles as raptor wings.
- Clara, as she found her voice and represented all of you in Social Justice meetings, and how she almost found a husband at assembly.
- Emma G, and her great enthusiasm for making music and for doing good in the world, which helped to send money to Rwanda and to bring Colombe to TA.
- Those of you who always entered my classroom with a smile and left with a word of thanks—Maggie, Jordan, Hyla, Erik, Ryan, Patrick, and our favorite twins Mitchell and Molly.
- Emily Emerson's one of a kind laugh.
- The grandest of grand entrances by Kayla, and Pedro.
- Brett's determination.
- Jade's sly sense of humor, and most of all her courage, and the warmth of this community as she shared an important transition.

Thank you, each and every one of you, for sharing your talents, your insights, your kindness and your hopes with your TA faculty.

So here's the part of Baccalaureate you've all been waiting for—the obligatory free advice:

First, some thoughts about diversity. I graduated from a big high school in NJ, 39 years ago, in a class of over 500 kids, and here's what I knew about diversity: people were male, or female; Christian, or Jewish, everyone belonged to a distinct racial group,

but everyone was heterosexual, and we all rooted for the Phillies. So in the years since then, my understanding of the arbitrary nature of the categories into which we sort each other and ourselves, has evolved quite a lot. For one thing, I found myself living in New England, where this team called the Boston Red Sox seems to get a lot of attention. And at some point I realized that the prospect that of the 500 kids in my class, there was not a single gay person, was mathematically absurd.

Then there's the idea of race, which serves as the foundation of some of the most shameful parts of American history. It was over 100 years ago that American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois observed that race was being used as a biological explanation for what he understood were in fact social and cultural differences between different populations of people. He spoke out against the idea of "white" and "black" as discrete groups, claiming that these distinctions ignored the scope of human diversity. And geneticists today agree, that race is not a biological phenomenon, but rather a system that humans have devised to categorize and (I would add) control each other. And in your lifetime, our understanding of gender and sexuality have evolved too, so that the language of either/or is no longer adequate to describe the diversity of human experience.

What does this mean for you? You're entering a world that is infinitely more complex, and far more interesting, than the world was just a few decades ago. And because you are young adults at this incredible moment when we recognize, perhaps clearly for the first time, that as between people of any two so called groups, the things we have in common are far more real than any lines that people can devise, that at this moment in the national conversation when leaders appeal to our more base instincts with promises of huge walls, and the media describes a deeply divided nation, it is incumbent upon you, our new generation of artists and scientists, parents and teachers, voters and leaders, to reject the power of the lines that for most of human history have divided us, and recognize that, as an activist named Peace Pilgrim once said, "We are all cells in the same body of humanity."

Recognize that our connections with each other are what, on an individual level, make life worth living, and as a species, have ensured our survival. Reach out to others, especially those who seem different from you. I have never regretted those times when I strayed out of my comfort zone to connect, even briefly, with someone with whom it appeared that I had nothing in common.

Let me give you an example: in the late 1980s I went to law school, at night, in blighted Camden, NJ, taking the train to and from Philadelphia. On the way to Camden, there would be a few hardy souls riding the train and scurrying on the streets, but when classes let out at 10:30 pm, the only people left in that part of town appeared to be up to no good. And there I was, this little person wearing a cheap suit and sneakers, lugging my text books on my back. I'd walk purposefully down the subway stairs, scare away a rat or two, and arrive by the tracks often just in time to witness a drug deal, or an angry exchange.

It seemed like the world's most desperate people hung out by those train tracks. I could run away, but I needed the ride home. I could stare off into space, but having mastered the concept of object permanence, I knew we'd all still be there. So I tried something else—I sized up the crowd, singled out and approached the most dangerous looking person there, and started a conversation. With something riveting, like “Hi, have you been waiting a long time?” My new friend would be stunned, but would always be polite, and everyone else on the platform would think I was with him, and this strategy got me through 4 years of late night classes.

And when I practiced law, I worked for Philadelphia's biggest firm where we mostly represented wealthy clients, with whom I had almost nothing in common (for one thing, I couldn't afford to hire myself), and when I practiced law in Vermont, I worked for individuals, many of whom had lives very different from mine, and who needed someone to stand beside them and speak on their behalf in a language most people don't know. For a few years, I represented people who found themselves caught up in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Some were appealing sentences, so they were prisoners. But they were also sons, and daughters, brothers, sisters, and parents. They trusted me with their stories, and from them I learned about experiences I wouldn't otherwise know, and I carry these people with me today.

I don't know what my life would have been like if I had found a tribe and hidden with them, but I suspect that I would suffer from a sense that I had missed something important. As Mother Teresa said, ‘If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.’

To experience the power of reaching out to someone who seems different from yourself, you need not ride the subway, or visit people in prison, although I recommend both. But you do have to overcome our tendency toward tribalism. We seek out people whom we believe to be most like ourselves, and this provides us with some comfort. But in so doing, we deprive ourselves of some great experiences and insights into our common humanity.

Instead, see as much of this world as you possibly can. Go places where people speak English with a different accent, and places where people don't think in English at all. Really listen to people with viewpoints that are very different from your own. We live today in a nation that is described as split into two—the red Republicans who celebrated the election of an outsider president, and the blue Democrats and their pollsters who simply couldn't fathom this outcome, or most of what has happened since election day.

I wonder who profits from this division—is it the media? Or the leaders who know that dividing comes right before conquering? When we fight with or dismiss each other, we forget that we have far more in common with each other than we possibly ever could with leaders who have never had to worry about racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, poverty, or the cost of health care or higher education, and who don't seem to care about the future of this planet.

I trust you to call out cynicism and opportunism when you see them, to reach out to others and to recognize that it's one of life's greatest privileges to be able to help someone else, and that you will on occasion have the challenge of graciously receiving help, and that all the while, I hope that you will draw on the values that you learned from the people celebrating your accomplishments this week. I trust that you will strive for a nation that is neither all blue nor red but brilliant purple, and that you will do your best to be an informed citizen, and that you will vote and make it count, and better still, you'll work for issues and candidates who pledge to work to protect this amazing planet and the rights of everyone on it, and best yet, you'll run for office, and make your corner of the world a little better.

There's some free advice – in a few days, we'll release you, to go forward and figure out everything else.

So go on, have a life full of adventures and friendships and great love and big ideas and purposeful work. Congratulations on a great start, class of 2017.