

Lansdowne Friends School Graduation

June 8, 2021

WELCOME

Good morning and welcome! I'm Neal Brown, Interim Head of School, and I'm thrilled to be here today to share with you Lansdowne Friends School's 2021 Meeting for Graduation.

I want to briefly explain what will happen in the next few minutes.

As a Friends School, we rest on the basic Quaker belief that there is an "inner light" within each human being, and so listening to one another, and attending to our shared presence and silence, is paramount. A Quaker service is called a Meeting For Worship, which we will begin in a moment, but what we will have here today can more accurately be called a Meeting for Worship ... for Graduation.

In today's Meeting for Worship, we too will sit in silence, taking in all the good energy in this wonderful space, and reflecting inwardly on this momentous occasion and right of passage for our graduates. If anyone is so moved, you can feel free to stand and share a message. Since the focus of our meeting today is graduation, your messages should be so directed. The messages can be ones of congratulations, advice, a story, a poem *et cetera*. I ask that you please leave time

between each message so that we can fully take in and appreciate what the previous speaker has shared.

Our period of worship will be about 20 minutes. At the end of this time, I will signal that the worship is concluded by saying “Good Morning” to the person closest to me. Then you too can do the same, but this year, instead of shaking hands, we are encouraging a gentle but loving elbow bump with those closest to you.

We will now welcome into the Meeting House our amazing 6th graders, the “Fab Five” as I call them, as we settle into silent worship together.

REMARKS

The 6th Grade Class of 2021 holds a special place in my heart, not only because it's my first year at Lansdowne Friends School and they're ... well... the only group of graduates that I've met so far... but because this group--with their close and genuinely caring camaraderie, their optimism, and their adaptability--helped to successfully lead our school and our community through this challenging once- (I hope) in-a-lifetime pandemic. They have modeled for all of our students, and for all of us as adults, how to approach a significant challenge, how to persevere and stay positive, and how to thrive under new and uncertain circumstances.

I've very much enjoyed the quality time that we have spent together this year, whether over pizza with Tr. Nancy and Tr. Lois at last week's "almost alumni" lunch (there was some impressive pizza eating, I might add), or talking about famous historical journeys in their Social Studies class with Tr. Karen, or on the playground just sharing stories, or of course at last month's culminating trip to the Pocono Environmental Education Center, which of course culminated in a compulsory visit to Dairy Queen! You can see that eating is a theme... In particular, I loved reading and discussing *Ghost Boys* with the five of you this winter -- and then watching you so capably lead our adult community in discussing this important book about racial injustice.

This group of graduates is tight-knit, supremely supportive of one another (most of the time), and able to laugh at themselves. And we've all seen them grow so much over the past year ... perhaps even more so because of the nature of this

past year ... both as individuals and as a group. In the Poconos, for example, this group had no trouble with the team-building challenges presented to them, for they'd already faced and overcome so many unique and historic challenges all year long.

This has also been a group that has been deeply committed to service. Whether cooking for the Life Center, cleaning our campus and local parks, participating in clothing and food drives, or raising money for UNICEF, they have brought to these service endeavors both enthusiasm and a mature-beyond-their-years understanding of how important it is to help others. This is a reflection of our school's mission in action, and it makes all of us enormously proud.

And while much of the credit for our graduates' success rightly goes to them, I also want to recognize that this moment and so many of their successes have depended on many people.

I first would like to direct everyone's attention to our teachers and all LFS staff members. The adults who work here are passionate about what they do. It's as simple as that. For the older folks in the room, think of math teacher Jaime Escalante in the film *Stand and Deliver* or English teacher John Keating, played by Robin Williams, in *Dead Poets Society*. Our teachers and non-teaching staff members work closely together not only to challenge students academically, but to ensure that they experience the wisdom and life habits that come from a foundation in Quakerism. That's a gift that our graduates will take with them for life. Our teachers make sure that each child is known and supported as a whole

person, even when the going gets tough. Even this year, they courageously created an environment where creativity and risk-taking were encouraged, where awareness of the world and of the feelings of others was heightened, and where students' ideas and interests continued to be supremely valued in a way that isn't typical in elementary schools. Put simply, here

at Lansdowne Friends, our kids' ideas truly matter.

In fact, near the top of my list of all that I've quickly come to treasure about this school, is the fact that our 6th graders—compared even to our pre-kindergartners and kindergartners— are just as intrinsically motivated about learning, just as positive about school, and just as connected to their teachers and to one another. This says so much about our talented and dedicated teachers and non-teaching staff members who set a tone that is challenging and nurturing, serious and playful. Please join me in applauding our amazing staff members.

This is a fulfilling and to-be-savored right of passage for you, our parents, but it's also a bittersweet moment. Your unconditional love and devotion, and the many sacrifices you have made ... from diapers to play dates to carpools to tuition payments – each has led to this day. I ask that all parents of our graduates please stand so that we can recognize all that you have given your children and our community.

Now I want to address a few remarks directly to you, our graduates.

It may look seamless, unplanned, or just naturally occurring, but we think a lot at Lansdowne Friends, not only about the specific skills that we want you, our graduates, to take with you to Middle School, but also about the habits and qualities that we most wish to instill and cultivate in you as you leave this friendly place. The other day at lunch we talked with you about staying curious about your academics, not just to please your teachers, but to enrich yourselves. We talked about taking risks and trying new things, joining clubs and middle school activities, and not losing your sense of adventure. We also have talked about other critical habits and qualities that you have developed during your time here ... the kind that will propel you forward not just in your next school, but in your lives. Think about perseverance and hard work, kindness, integrity and genuine respect for all people, knowing oneself and standing up for your beliefs and challenging wrong-doing, but also being open to new ideas, caring for this increasingly vulnerable planet of ours, and, of course, looking to solve conflicts peacefully and with an awareness of someone else's perspective. We know that you will take all of this and more with you to your next schools and throughout your lives, because that's what Lansdowne Friends School graduates do.

As I think you know, last summer the world lost the legendary civil rights leader John Lewis when he passed away at age 80. I bring him up because in dedicating his entire adult life to protecting and improving the rights of African Americans and all marginalized groups in this country, he demonstrated through his life's work the very qualities that I've just mentioned. John Lewis stood up for what he believed in with great tenacity and at great risk. He persevered, he believed in the equality and dignity of all people, and he looked for non-violent solutions to the

institutional racism plaguing our country. He didn't look the other way, and he didn't wait for others to do the work. After the murder of George Floyd last spring, Mr. Lewis encouraged the global demonstrations against racial violence, seeing these as a continuation of his life's work. From his sick bed, he was quoted as saying, "It was very moving to see hundreds of people from all over America and around the world take to the streets -- to speak up, to speak out, to get into what I call "good trouble."

I think there's a lot of wisdom and courage in John Lewis' notion of "good trouble," ... the kind of actions that may not make everyone comfortable or happy but that speak the truth and that can bring about positive changes. Interestingly, our school's motto is "Service above Self." I think John Lewis offers us a model of this motto in action, and one worthy of our own aspirations. He clearly put service for others and for the greater good above his own personal needs.

I'd like to tell you that middle school will be easy, but that wouldn't be telling you the truth. Perhaps even more important than time and effort, though, the key to your success will hinge on your being open to new ideas, and willing to take the risks necessary to learn and grow. Perhaps your biggest challenge in middle school will simply be learning to do what John Lewis modeled so well—to be yourself, to stand up for what you believe, to respect all people, and to forge your own path, not one imposed on you by others.

This coming fall, I implore you to be the 7th grader who goes beyond the assigned reading to pursue an interest in greater depth, and who seeks out a teacher to

explore an issue from another angle. Be the 7th grader who tries out new activities, joins groups, and gets involved in the life of your school, who isn't afraid to be yourself, even when there is social pressure to conform, to treat others poorly, or to become cynical about learning. And be the 7th grader who speaks up when you witness something happening that you know isn't right, again, just like John Lewis.

I hope you'll always feel that you have a home here at Lansdowne Friends School. I am enormously fond of and proud of each one of you. Congratulations.