

Valedictorian speech by Malorie Carter

Good afternoon, friends, family, faculty, and, of course, my fellow graduates. Even though speaking in front of this many people usually only happens in my nightmares - I am truly honored to be up here before you all today.

Before I begin, I want to thank each and every one of you for being here to celebrate this amazing achievement that the Class of 2026 has worked endlessly for over the past thirteen years.

On behalf of my classmates, I want to express our immense gratitude to the parents, families, teachers, coaches, and mentors who have supported us every step of the way. None of us got here alone.

I would also like to take a moment to thank the people who have been especially impactful to me through these past years.

To my teachers - thank you for not only educating me but inspiring a love of learning that will stay with me long after graduation.

To my friends - thank you for filling every day with so much laughter and joy.

To my family - thank you for the unconditional love and support you all have given to me.

And most importantly, to my mom - thank you for everything you have done and continue to do for me. Thank you for making my lunch every day since kindergarten, for starting my car each morning so I could make it - somewhat - on time for school, and for

getting me through every late night and early morning. You are my biggest supporter and my greatest inspiration. I would not be here today without you.

Now, as we graduate today, many of us will be stepping into a new stage of life - one where we will begin making our own choices and finding our own direction. Up until now, we've had all these people beside us guiding and supporting us as we've learned and grown.

In many ways, growing up has been similar to learning how to ride a bike.

And if your experience was anything like mine, then you probably had your mom or dad beside you, holding onto the back of your bike, keeping you steady. At first, we were completely dependent on them to be there, keeping us balanced if we leaned too far, reassuring us when we were scared, and catching us before we hit the ground too hard. Even though we were the ones steering and pedaling, there was always someone there, guiding us forward and keeping us steady. You might've said to them, "Promise me you won't let go; I'm not ready yet" - and maybe they did promise you, but deep down you both knew that the only way to learn was if they let go.

Life has worked the same way. For years, the people around us have helped shape who we are. They taught us the ways of the world, encouraged us when we doubted ourselves, and pushed us to keep going when things got difficult.

But eventually, there comes a moment when the person holding on to that bike has to let go. Not because they want you to fail, but because they know you are capable of moving forward on your own.

And today feels a lot like that moment - For the first time, we are beginning to make decisions completely for ourselves. We get to decide what paths we take, what goals we chase, and what kind of people we want to become.

And if I'm being completely honest, that kind of freedom can feel terrifying. Because once someone finally lets go, falling becomes possible.

There will be moments in life where we lose balance. Moments where we make mistakes, take wrong turns, or feel unsure of our abilities.

But the truth is, nobody expects you to ride a bike perfectly the first time. Falling is just a part of the process. Scraped knees don't mean we are failures. Wobbling doesn't mean we are incapable. It simply means we are trying.

Our life after graduation will be no different. There will be setbacks. There will be failures. There will be times when things don't go according to plan. But what matters most is whether we allow those setbacks to stop us, or whether we choose to get back up on our bike and keep pedaling forward.

Because if we become too afraid to take chances, too afraid to fail, or too afraid of uncertainty, we risk never moving forward at all.

And just like riding up a hill, the moment you start doubting yourself and slowing down, is usually when you lose balance. But if you just keep pedaling, even when it's difficult, you will eventually make it to the top.

Now, with the handlebars fully in our grasp, we have the freedom to choose our own direction. We may not be able to control every obstacle that comes our way, but we are able to control whether we keep going forward after we fall.

So, graduates, as we leave this chapter behind, I hope we don't fear falling. I hope that we trust ourselves enough to keep moving forward even when the road ahead feels uncertain.

And finally, I want you to remember this: no matter where you are, you are not alone. - The people who helped you get here today may have let go of that bike, but if you look behind you, they are still there, cheering you on every step of the way.

So, wherever life takes you next, strive to keep growing, to keep being courageous, and most importantly, to keep pedaling.

Congratulations Class of 2026!

Thank you!