Five Star Message

Authored by Tom Davis '71

Commencement Address
Brookfield Academy
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Mr. Ricci, Mr. Simmons, Board of Trustees, faculty and staff, family, friends, alumni, and most importantly, 2026 graduates of Brookfield Academy, I am extremely happy and privileged to be here today at the 56th commencement ceremony of Brookfield Academy.

I see, even as I stand here, some of my classmates from my time at the Academy. I can see also, that many of your parents here are previous graduates of Brookfield Academy. I see many alumni who are here to observe and share in this special occasion. Their very presence reflects and testifies to the influence and importance that the Academy has been, and continues to be, in your lives and in the lives of this Academy community.

I have had the privilege of speaking about Brookfield Academy several times. I offered remarks on Founders Day in 2012 as the Academy celebrated its 50 year anniversary. I was invited to address the Class of 1990 at its senior dinner. And, I was honored to give a speech to my graduating Class in 1971, now 55 years ago. Wow. Practically ancient history. More on that later.

But today is the day to celebrate the Class of 2026 for your accomplishments during your time at BA and to celebrate the anticipation of what the future may hold for each of you. You have completed your courses. You have taken the AP exams. You have delivered your presentation on a Freedom Philosophy Principle. You sit here today, like the 2,237 previous BA graduates before you, ready to close this chapter and open the next. This is your exciting day, and I realize that I stand squarely in the way of your celebration time. So, I will try to be poignant, but brief.

Returning here to the BA campus brings me back in time to the years that I personally spent here, first at the original Academy of Basic Education and then Brookfield Academy. It was in 1962 (now that is going way back), I was one of 35 students (16 of whom were the children of the Founders) enrolled in this experiment called ABE, along with my brother and two sisters. My younger brother would join us as he became of age. I was one of 6 fourth graders in Mrs. Mahlum's class in a room in the building that you now call Founders Hall. I attended here for the next 9 years, graduating in 1971 in what was the inaugural graduation of BA high school students. Our graduating class of 19 students, dressed in robes like you are wearing today, sat on folding chairs on the gym floor of Freedom Hall.

I remember that graduation like it was yesterday. I remember receiving my diploma just like you will receive today. I still have it in my treasure file. I remember the keynote graduation speaker and his message to us. It was probably more meaningful to me because that speaker was my grandfather, Bill Grede, who addressed us with his vibrant and motivating message of freedom, a principle dear to him, dear to our family, dear to our country, and certainly dear to the founding principles of Brookfield Academy.

I also remember the valedictorian speech and the message he shared. That also was easy to recall because that valedictorian was me. At age 18, I delivered my rather idealistic view of my future and the future of my classmates. In my speech, I shared the lyrics of the song "The Impossible Dream," from the play *Man of La Mancha*. Lofty words about chasing a bright, worthwhile future.

But at age 18, did I really know or understand what the future might hold for me or my classmates? Looking back from 55 years later, today was an unimaginable and unpredictable destination on life's journey. Yes, 1971 was a big year for me and for the world. A different world back then. Movie tickets cost $1.50. The McDonald's Quarter Pounder introduced that year cost 53 cents. A brand-new Ford Mustang car cost $3,395. A startup coffee company, called Starbucks, opened its first store in Seattle, selling coffee beans in a bag, and later selling coffee by the cup for 87 cents. Gasoline was 23 cents per gallon. Oh, those were the good old days.

In 1971, I went off to college at Rice University with a slide rule, an electric typewriter, and a long-distance calling card so I could call home from Houston on Sunday nights. It was a different time. A different world.

Fast forward to today, and just consider all the changes that have taken place in the past 55 years. Cell phones, laptops, the Internet, and now AI and more. Since 1971, there have been sweeping changes in technology, in demographics, in world politics, in morals, and in our very country we call the United States of America. Some changes for the better. Some not so much for the better.

Who knows what the next 55 years will bring for you. They will be unpredictable, unimaginable, and yet exciting and full of opportunities for each of you. So why do I bring this up about the times and events 55 years ago compared to today? Not to talk about me. But for me, and many of us sitting here today, we can see how much our world has changed. And yet, despite all the change, there are still some things that haven’t changed, and, thank goodness and thanks to intentionality and conviction, one of those things that has survived the test of time for the past 55 years is Brookfield Academy.

I am not talking about the facilities and the campus. Looking around today, what a beautiful campus that has changed, for the better, for the positive, since I was a student here. You still gather at the flagpole for school assembly, just like we did back in the formative days. You still recite poetry and say the Pledge of Allegiance and recite the Academy prayer (which, if asked, I could probably still recite today.) And why do I remember all these things today? Because that is what the Academy was all about then during my years and that is what it is all about today.

The Academy was then, and it remains so today, a special place where children come to learn and to grow. It is focused on you, the students, and what is best for you. The Academy was and remains today all about people, committed people, motivated by principles and dedicated to a purpose. It is about excellence. It is about perseverance. It is about doing your best and giving your best. That was the dream then. That is still the dream today. And we graduates, including me, are the beneficiaries of those Founders, those visionaries, those people who willed this school into its existence and then sustained its lifeblood with principled conviction. We Academy students and graduates are drinking from wells we did not dig and eating fruit from trees we did not plant. And the key to this lasting success is this: the Founding Trustees had a clear purpose in mind for this school that remains today: to develop responsible citizens, educated, motivated, prepared to do great things with their lives.

From its beginning, Mr. Smeeth, the founding Headmaster, articulated this vision as he set forth the five brilliant stars, which would hold the foundation of the school’s heritage, inspiring individuality, proclaiming truth, challenging the intellect, and instilling character in every fiber of its students. These Five Stars continue to permeate every aspect of the school, from its philosophy to its classrooms, to its faculty, and even to the names on the buildings.

I want to encourage you; no, I want to charge you, with taking these Five Stars with you and to live them. These ideals are at the bedrock of this school and, if you have been listening and learning, they are now the bedrock of you. They have helped to form you as a person, and they will help shape you as you go into your future, adult life.

You know, I often hear many commencement speakers condescendingly start their comments by saying, “You probably won’t remember me or what I said one year from now.” But I hope otherwise. I hope you do

remember this day, and all your days, at BA for a lifetime, just like I described how my own experience has stayed with me. So, please pay attention for just a short time longer. One more time. As your teachers would say, to get your attention: this will be on the test. So, with all humility and respect for the clock on the wall, here is my message to you.

Today is not a fork in the road. It is not a new direction. It is an inflection point, a continuation, on your life's journey. And on this journey, I am asking you today that you imagine you are wearing a backpack. Similar to the one you probably have been using at school. Much like this one. And you will be filling it with essentials and provisions for your trip. I am asking you to visualize this backpack as a metaphor or even a symbol for that journey. You already have put a lot of things in your backpack. I am charging you today with being sure that you take the Five Stars with you. You will need them, and they will support you along the way.

Being here today, you have already loaded your backpack with the first Star, your heritage. Your heritage, your family history, your parents' guidance as they raised you, your experiences at your church, at BA, and with other people. This is your past. It is strong. It is important to remember and cherish it. It has confidently shaped who you are. I have sometimes heard from a few high school graduates that they hope to find themselves at college. Don't be one of those people. You are not lost. Those who go off with that outlook often forget their heritage and either stay lost or remove their heritage out of their backpack. Keep your heritage safely and securely stored in your backpack.

You have also tossed a lot of intellect into your backpack. BA has challenged you in this area to enhance your God-given mind. But intellect is more than just knowledge. Intellect, coupled with a moral compass, yields wisdom. And wisdom will always overcome doubt and uncertainty and fear. Use your intellect to act wisely, to do good, and to make this world a better place.

As I look at the world today, I think that your greatest challenge will be in the area of the third Star: Truth. Today's world has so much easy access to information that it is now and will become increasingly more difficult to discover truth. For all the benefits that will come from an AI world, I believe that truth will be a rare and shrouded commodity that will be exceedingly more difficult to find through all the noise of the world. I challenge you to rest on the foundations of your heritage, using the wisdom of your intellect and, with the beacon of truth, share the light of truth in all you do. Be discerning, and grow in truth.

Now, even as you load your backpack with heritage, intellect, and truth, you can wrap your backpack in your own individuality. Just like this BA monogram means something when people see it, so the outside of your backpack will be how the world sees and understands you. Express your individuality on your backpack with words and actions that reflect who you are and what you believe. And all this will be reflected in your individual actions. Let the world see you by how you adorn your backpack with your individuality based on what is inside.

Finally, your backpack won't be of worth to you unless it is strapped firmly to your shoulder. These straps are your character. These straps are the most important part of the whole "vision." Your character, which has been shaped by what is in your backpack, is the binding force of it all. No matter what you are going to accomplish in life, your character matters. As a friend of mine recently shared with me, "Your character will outlast your resume." Scripture, in fact, tells us a person's reputation is more precious than gold, and that reputation rests in your character. Work hard not to let your character get tarnished.

That fills your backpack today.

I took these Five Stars on my journey through life, and I hope you will take them with you, too. None of us knows what the future will be for any of us. I couldn't imagine my future 55 years after graduation. And I can't imagine what your future will be. One thing I do know for certain is what Yogi Berra, one of my favorite philosophers, once said: "The future ain't what it used to be." But to the optimist, the future also hasn't been written yet. You, Class of 2026, will write your own future.

So, that's my message. Hopefully, the image of the backpack will stay with you as you go off on your journey to college and throughout your life. Remember Brookfield Academy. It is a special place. It is special because of its clear and deep-seated purpose, its solid, foundational, unwavering principles, and its committed, caring people. But all this effort and all this energy will only be worth it if you embrace it and make it part of who you are. You students, we students, are the testimony of the Academy. We are the past, the present, and the future. But the heritage of our past is only significant if it becomes the foundation of our futures.

BA has started a process in you that you will now have to continue on your own. Don't lose the momentum as you head off to college. Let the Five Stars of Brookfield Academy shine brightly in your life and in what you do and, most importantly, who you are.

To help you remember and as a memento of this day, I am not going to give you a backpack. Instead, I am going to hand you a medallion as you cross the stage. The medallion has the Five Stars engraved on it: Heritage, Intellect, Truth, Individuality, and Character. I encourage and hope that you will attach it to your own backpack. Or your keychain or key fob, to remind you of their meaning and importance, and all that you have learned at Brookfield Academy.

Okay, one last thing. You wouldn't be sitting here today without the love, support, and encouragement of a lot of people. I encourage you today, be intentional and thank those who have given you the gift of sitting here today. I promise you will come back from your freshman year in college and truly and sincerely realize that you had an exceptional educational experience at BA. So, say thank you to the school, to your teachers who are seated here with you. They have poured themselves into you, and nothing will make them more pleased than to hear that you have gone on your journey to become responsible, constructive adults.

And now, I want you to do one more thing, and then I will be done. This may be unconventional but I am going to ask you to stand up and face the audience. Seated out there are your parents. Find your parents and look them in the eyes. Now put your hand over your heart and mouth the words "thank you" to them, for they have made the sacrifices that have made this part of your journey possible. They love you and want the very best for you. Tell them "Thank you."

You may be seated again.

In conclusion, it has been my honor to share this time with you today. You are an amazing and talented group of people. May God bless you in all that you do and in everything and in everywhere your journey takes you.

Congratulations, Class of 2026. Thank you.