

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honor to be here. I would like to express my appreciation to all of my teachers, friends, and family members who helped to get to where I am right now: standing here in front of you. I would also like to thank the administration for providing me with this opportunity. Almost exactly four years ago, I remember leaving my middle school class for the last time and heading into the exciting (and sometimes scary) world of high school. I know a lot of you were nervous, though you won't admit it now. High school can be intimidating, for sure. But it can also be a place for growth. If you didn't spend all your time updating your Facebook status or tweeting about your weekend plans—or even if you did—you had the opportunity to meet and mingle with thousands of other students. You got the chance to share ideas, passions, and strengths.

When I first came to this school district, I was a bit apprehensive. I knew I was entering a small-town country high school, which couldn't have been more different from the school I'd left in Chicago. But the students I met that first year did not conform to my country bumpkin expectations. Instead, they were kind and welcoming, smart and creative, athletic and determined. And this isn't something that is just a part of our school, but visible in the rest of this community as well.

As I made my way up the ranks—from lowerclassman to upperclassman—it became clear that my classmates were compassionate, upbeat, curious, respectful, and highly talented people.

Your kindness and dedication have resulted in thousands of hours of community service performed for various organizations in our town, including fundraisers for Relay for Life, the food bank, the animal shelter and more.

Your vast talents range from the performing arts to athletics to vocational endeavors to various fields of academic study. For proof, look no further than the results of the 2013 state football tournament, the other six state tournaments we have been a part of this year, the resounding success of our recent play, the size of our Advanced Placement classes, and the results of various local, state, national and international competitions where we have distinguished ourselves and proudly represented this wonderful place.

We have been given such rich opportunities in a safe and happy environment, and for that reason I believe that we can overcome any obstacle. And we should, because if we don't, we are wasting our potential. I was struggling in my middle school classes in Chicago and left with a less-than-average GPA and no extracurricular activities under my belt. I realized that I couldn't spend the rest of my life playing video games and drinking Mountain Dew. I started studying every night and working hard for extra credit wherever it was available. I began to compete in track and field. And gradually, my goal of skating through life evolved into a love of learning and staying active, which I hope will become a lifelong passion.

It is time to set goals for your future. Before you can do that, however, you need a vision. A dream. Over the next few years you may end up at a college or trade school. You may begin

working full-time or even start a family. No matter what your dream is for the future, you can get there with the dedication, determination, and focus that you have learned while here at this very high school.

We, the class of 2013, are a powerhouse of innovation and creativity. We will push boundaries to make this world a better place even in small ways.

Always remember where you came from. And always remember where you are going.

Congratulations, graduates.