

Thank you Mr. Lambert for the introduction as well as Superintendent Long, Associate Superintendent Sister Catherine, Father Norman, Faculty, and staff for all their contributions.

Before I begin, I have some very important people that I want to thank. Mom, Dad, and Scott--thank you for your unwavering support, innumerable sacrifices, and unending love. Alex, Evan, Bridget, Ben, and Rowan; thank you for pulling me out of my room to go bowling, to the movies, or to a Bees game. You five helped keep me sane these past eighteen years and my mental wellbeing thoroughly thanks you. Cara, Ashley, Deri and Grandma, thank you for being my sounding boards and confidants. I also want to thank all of my friends who were down in the trenches with me these past four years. You kept me going on the most stressful days and were willing to wallow with me when life threw curveballs. Specifically, I want to thank Tereza for always cartwheeling it out and making me smile. And I want to thank Amani for always supporting me, listening to me, pushing me, and laughing with me.

The speech that I am going to give today is not the one that I had initially planned on giving. But trust me, you are not missing out on much. I was going to talk about each one of us as graduating seniors making the most out of our next adventure--whether that be college, work, traveling, or something else entirely. But I decided that it was too vague--make the most of it. Cool Gwen I'll make the most cookies I mean honestly what does that even mean. So I turned to one of my most trusted allies over the past four years... Google and I typed in science behind comfort zone.

It turns out that there is a lot of science behind the comfort zone--106 million results to be exact. I read a whopping three of them and here is what I learned. To maximize learning we have to be outside of our comfort zone 70% of the time. I do not need to explain to any of you what it means to be outside of your comfort zone. To us, all it feels like is that our palms are sweating, we are nervous, we feel worried. And all of this is supported by the science because when we delve into the unknown our whole brain lights up with activity--the anxious, fear parts fire ferociously because this is foreign. The only parts of the brain that fire even faster, are the parts that are connected to learning.

I know that I have experienced this at Judge. Honors Physics was far out of my comfort zone...I mean like from Judge to free parking far. So I focused up more, I took better notes, I listened more closely--because I had to. But 70%. 70%. That works out to be about 11 hours a day if you are up for 16 hours a day. Good lord help me if I had to do Physics for 11 hours a day... sorry Dr. Atherton.

Thankfully, our comfort zone can be pushed in all aspects of our lives. We can eat with new people at lunch which is teaching us about social skills like empathy. We can try new sports and join new clubs. But there is one really pesky thing about comfort zones--they grow. Those kids you started sitting with are now your friends. That new club you joined last year is suddenly feeling comfortable and safe. Physics does not scare you anymore--I am still working on that one.

So now you are probably thinking--Gwen what do you want from us we can't join a new club or find new friends the second we feel comfortable? You, imaginary person in the audience who is thinking this, are very right. Honestly when I wrote this rhetorical question I had a bit of a panic attack--my second speech attempt felt like it was dying under the weight of this question. But then I realized that you do not have to make big changes to get out of your comfort zone.

When I was in dance 1 my freshman year, I was well within my comfort zone. Twelve years of competitive dance had over prepared me for the class. I'll be honest--I was bored out of my mind. But I decided that this was the perfect opportunity to learn how to watch a combination and just do it--see it once, do it. So I tried it. While all the other girls in my class practiced the combination I just stood there. Mr. Shaw had done it once and I just waited. When it came time to go across the floor with the combination I made an utter fool out of myself. My brain panicked. I was humiliatingly uncomfortable. But I kept at it and eventually my brain learned how to take what it saw one time and do it.

Now this is just an example, my point is that you can take something so familiar--so far inside your comfort zone and push it out. This exercise is painful and it seems so much easier just to go back to easy, but we can strive to be better.

So I pose a challenge not just to the seniors but to everyone and not just for next year or for the next four, but as an everyday kind of thing. Be uncomfortable. Push yourself through the pain and the fear. Force yourself to think deeper, play harder, and love kinder. If you can't do 70% start at 5%. For those 48 minutes a day, let yourself live in the unknown. And when that unknown becomes safe, pick another realm. It never stops--the endless pursuit for greatness. That may seem terrifying but I find it comforting. You do not need to be in a four walled classroom to learn, to better yourself, to grow. You just need to be outside your comfort zone. That "just outside" is in no way meant to belittle the power of the wall between the comfort zone and the unknown. It is tall, wide, and strong. But we can all find ways to go over it, under it, or just plain through it. I know we can because I have seen all of us do it--at poetry out loud, in the plays, on the field, in the pool, in the classroom, at our jobs. You all know how to do it.

So step up to the challenge. Push yourself to better your own life and the lives of others. I can't wait to see what you all will do. I hope it is uncomfortably terrifying and astoundingly beautiful.