

Madeline Axtmann: “Don’t let fear stop you from living a wild, crazy, exciting life.”

Good evening. I would first like to congratulate all of my fellow graduating seniors, and thank all of the parents, family members, and faculty who have helped get us this far. We couldn’t have done it without your help and support.

It’s very likely that half of you sitting here in front of me probably have no idea who I am. This is because I came from Vets, so I’ve only been here at Toll Gate for about a year. And though I’m aware that our experiences vary, and coming from two different schools means having lived totally separate lives, we have all shared experiences throughout our years in high school that we can each relate to in our own way.

1,375 days ago, we each took our first steps onto the grounds of high school. “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” as Neil Armstrong once said. We were freshman; squeaky clean with our new clothes and new backpacks and high hopes for the next four years in front of us. We stepped onto our high school campuses with a sense of pride in ourselves... only, this pride was shortly eradicated. We were freshman. And what we thought was cool wasn’t actually cool, and turned out to be one giant cringe that we would regret in our later lives. But nonetheless, it was exciting to be in a new environment, so we got through that season in our lives.

Then, sophomore year began. We had even higher hopes, because the relief of not being a freshman anymore was almost too much to handle, and so our pride became once again embedded into our personas. We walked through those hallways, heads high and shoulders broad, as if we weren’t just freshman only 3 months prior. Life had changed for us and things began picking up speed. Hope rose again.

Then junior year began. “Junior year is the most important year” is what teachers and parents told us over and over, as if the stress of our classes wasn’t enough pressure already. With bags under our eyes and heavy backpacks on our shoulders, we pushed through our classes, took the SAT’s at least once, some of us three times, cried, laughed, and made memories at Junior prom and other school events. Junior year was hard but it was a year that made us resilient and taught us a lot; it was a year we’ll never forget.

Then, senior year began. Senior year is the year that everyone looks forward to for so many different reasons, such as feeling secure, finally knowing our way around the building, and seeing the light at the end of the tunnel of high school. Except, for me and 52 other seniors, we felt like freshmen all over again. Though trying to meander my way through the hallways proved to be difficult when trying to figure out how to get to the bridges between the two buildings, things definitely got better as the days went on, and I’m grateful for the teachers and students who helped smooth the transition for us Vets kids. Senior year was filled with both sorrows and joys, mixed emotions and nostalgic memories. It was a whirlwind of tears and laughter and unforgettable moments. Senior year was a year to remember.

And finally, graduation.

1,375 days later, we are not the same people as we were freshman year. We are stepping foot onto this stage, graduating and receiving our diplomas. For all of us here, no matter what we have gone through this year, we've gotten through it together, and that in itself is something to be proud of.

To reflect on these past four years, I think all of us can agree that no matter what each of our experiences have been, high school is not what we thought it would be. Life throws us so many curve balls, especially when we least expect it. We continue to have high hopes in the midst of a life that isn't always fair, and we continue to have hope when life doesn't always treat us like we feel we deserve to be treated. We continue to have hope even when we know that life is gonna knock us down more times than we can imagine.

But the thing is, we can't knock ourselves down. We can't be our own obstacles, letting fear be the driving force of every decision that we make. We can't let fear stand in the way of finding the kind of joy and happiness that remains strong even when sorrows come our way. None of us know what kind of future lies in the days ahead of us, but one thing we can be sure of is we are not defined by the things that happen to us, but by the way we choose to act upon those experiences. We can choose to let the world bring us down, or we can choose to let light guide our lives and have hope in the midst of darkness. There is always a light at the end of the tunnel, and we have to remember this. Don't let fear stop you from living a wild, crazy, exciting life. Take risks. Be brave. Make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. It's gonna be a fight to live an amazing, interesting life, but it's definitely a fight worth fighting.

So, in closing, I want to again congratulate all of the graduating seniors and wish you all good luck in your future endeavors, whatever they may be. Farewell, and I'll see you all in 20 years at the Toll Gate high school reunion.