VALEDICTORIAN SPEECH

FOR

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Hello everyone! It’s a great honor to speak to all of you today! Today is a great day for all of us. I want to congratulate all of my virtual classmates from Orange County Virtual School and I want to thank all of the faculty and staff of OCVS for all of the support we’ve received throughout our high school years. To all of the parents, family and friends in attendance here today, thank you too, for the encouragement all of us received from all of you. Although circumstances and schedules do not allow me to be with all of you in person today, and I apologize for missing the festivities and celebration, thanks to the power and ubiquity of modern technology, we are still able to celebrate together-in a very modern way!

As many of you may know, the virtual school system has been an incredible means of educational support to young people throughout the country for many reasons. I wouldn’t be here celebrating my graduation if it weren’t for the opportunity to earn a quality high school education in an alternative environment. Each one of us has chosen to matriculate within the virtual school system for many different and unique reasons and in my case; I had health challenges that threatened to compromise the continuation of my education. Helen Keller, no stranger to physical challenges and triumphs said, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it.” Thanks to the modern technology so many of us take for granted, I was literally given the opportunity to “breathe.” I have asthma, and although I did attend regular school for many years, by the time I reached 9th grade, my schoolwork was being compromised by my medical condition and that just wasn’t acceptable. Thanks to a wise and intuitive guidance counselor-thank you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_!, I began learning within the virtual educational system and it has been a life changing experience.

Some parents and adults unfamiliar with the system may question the validity of receiving a virtual education, but for those of us who have flourished within its context, it is clear that the future is **now**, and my graduating classmates today have developed and mastered essential skills and habits required to achieve success in today’s fast paced world. I know that I’ve learned so much thanks to my online education. I’ve learned how to be independent and to work at a pace that supports my learning and retention of knowledge. I’ve learned that it is up to me to demonstrate my honor and discipline and it is my responsibility to get the work done. (**If you want to make a little joke, you can say**) I’ve also learned that lunch selections in my mother’s “school cafeteria” are quite tasty! (**Pause for the laugh**).

GK Chesterton said, “Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.” In our case, not only the soul of education passed to us from the earlier generation, the means of acquiring that education has been a gift from the people that have preceded us, and thanks to the necessity of really being familiar with the modern way in which we’ve learned, we have sharpened critical skills and I believe we have a tremendous advantage in navigating the rest of our educational careers and our professional lives as well. Although the concept of home schooling is nothing revolutionary, the virtual school has prepared us for unlimited educational growth and professional access in the future.

I am also proud to be a part of an educational community that is beginning to attain national recognition. Many states around the country are embracing virtual education as a viable alternative, and in fact, last year, a white paper published by the Rio Grande Foundation in New Mexico, cited the “Florida Model” when introducing virtual schooling as a key component in educational reform. In the paper, a very important point was brought up. A man named Gregg Vanourek of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation helped to clarify the importance of online education. He said, “in a traditional classroom, time is fixed and learning is variable. In a virtual environment, learning is fixed and time is variable.” Yes. Thanks to the virtual classroom, we are able to learn and absorb the entire lesson at a pace that suits each one of us. Sometimes it is the simplest of ideas that can be the most revolutionary!

Think about the ways that thorough knowledge of how to navigate within a virtual world will serve us as we continue our education and enter the workforce. No longer are we constrained to our local communities to rely on receiving a quality education. We can literally go to any college, university or vocational school we choose-that has a virtual program… The opportunities are amazing! In our professional lives, the world has the potential to be our “oyster” as well. We hear so many stories of loss of jobs as a major threat to the economy, and one reason is the outsourcing of jobs. Thanks to the virtual community, any one of us can seek professional fulfillment from any number of career choices available through telecommuting!

Michelangelo, genius, inventor, and probably THE driving force of the Renaissance, very simply said, “I am still learning.” How simple and to the point! I know I am still a teenager, but as I stand on the threshold of adulthood, I know one thing, and like Michelangelo, I say to all of you, “I am still learning too.” All life is composed of a series of lessons, and thanks to innovations and creative problem solving, millions of students throughout the country and even the world now have the capability to receive an education.

President James Garfield said, “Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be maintained.” Each generation has its ways and means to learn. Being able to literally “think outside the box”-or the brick and mortar school has been an eye opening and positive experience for me and I am sure my fellow graduates agree. As we get ready to go on to the next phases of our lives-whether that is continuing on to college or joining the workforce, our collective and unique experience has served us well on so many levels. Not only have we learned, I hope we have inspired. When I think that our virtual school system is looked upon by communities in other states as inspiration, I am really moved and proud. I am proud to be a part of a groundbreaking system. I am proud to share what I’ve learned in the hopes that other students who may have thought they have physical limitations learn that, thanks to a modern and inclusive approach to education; they too, can experience the exhilaration of limitless educational possibilities.

I want to thank the teachers and staff of OCVS for their vision, patience and knowledge in guiding us through our virtual high school careers. I want to thank my parents for supporting me in achieving my educational goals and for being there and encouraging me, even when I just didn’t feel like I could do it. I learned endurance, resilience and commitment and I am very thankful to have had those essential life lessons. And I want to thank all of you. Thank you for listening and sharing my virtual journey of knowledge with me. I can’t wait to see what’s next on my path, but the one thing I know is that I am more prepared than ever to meet the challenge and find a way to learn, grow and inspire others. Thank you all!