**14179, Karen Smalley - Graduation**

Good evening School Board Members, Teachers and Staff, Family and Friends, and most importantly Graduates!!

I am so very honored to be here with you tonight. What an amazing gift you have given me by asking me to speak to you on this very special night. I have watched most of you grow up over the years. Some of you I have just had the pleasure of meeting. Either way, I really can’t believe this day is here. It truly seems like it was just yesterday some kids here were power sliding their tricycles at Reba’s Preschool. There are a few kids are still power sliding, on a big bike now, and not at Reba’s Preschool anymore but all over the country.

I have had many of you in my own home and I think of you as my own children. So please excuse me if I get a little emotional, because today not only is my own son graduating, but 66 other kids that I love like my own. 19 kids and counting has nothing on me!

This is probably the hardest thing I have ever done besides watching my children walk into their first day of kindergarten. When I was asked to give this speech, my first thought was I couldn’t believe you guys picked me. My family and I care so much about each and every one of you, but I never knew if it showed. I thought, what could the wonderful class of 2015 learn from me? Then I thought to myself, “OH BOY!!” How am I going to get through this?? My face turns red if I talk to more than 5 people at one time! I can only imagine what color it is now!  There is no way I’m going to be able to do this. I want you to know that your bravery gave me the courage to stand up here in front of all of you tonight.

But then I realized that this is a great opportunity to show you guys that you can accomplish things that you never thought were possible. That is the first thing I want you to remember. You can accomplish anything you set your mind to, but you have to get out of your comfort zone!  Look at me, I’m way out of my comfort zone here. It may not be perfect and your heart may beat faster than it ever has before in your life. But you can do it. Don’t forget that you can do it! No excuses-- Go Buhl Middle School Wrestling!

In your life outside of high school, you will be faced with many challenging things. College will be hard, your job will be hard. Your life will be hard, harder than you can imagine. But once you face these challenges you will realize you can overcome them. Once you overcome them, you will realize it is all worth it. It will be worth that college diploma; it will be worth that job; it will be worth that feeling of accomplishment that you get when you lay down in bed at night and reflect on everything. But you have to choose to take on these challenges.

That brings me to the next thing I want to talk about, Choices. Sometimes, we can go on autopilot with our choices. We go on autopilot for what to eat for lunch or what pjs you will sleep in tonight. We make lots of choices each day. But tomorrow is the start of the rest of your life.  Tomorrow you will need to start making conscious choices of who you want to be.  No one gets to tell you who you are or who you will be, you have to make those choices, because you have to live with them.  There will be a lot of crossroads in your lives. But the choices are yours to make.

Seniors, today is a big day! But tomorrow is an even bigger day! Tomorrow you will start making choices that will shape the rest of your life! Tomorrow is a big day, but don’t forget, you still have your family and your friends and me, still there to help you with those choices.  You have already begun making some pretty amazing choices. Some of you chose to join the football team your senior year, what a brave choice! Some of you have chosen to join the military, such an amazing and selfless choice.

When I was writing this speech I had so many ideas I had to start writing them down. I also had so many wonderful memories of this amazing group of young people.  I have enjoyed watching some of you at your band and choir performances, the pep band this year has been so awesome! I have enjoyed going to drama productions and watching the thrilling shows you have been a part of. That dastardly Dr. Devereux comes to mind! The future is bright for our community if you continue to make the types of choices you have been making.

A few random memories came to mind in this process: the time one of these kids broke both arms in football and the first question the boys asked him was how did he wipe….The night several boys stayed at our house and somehow our microwave ended up in the bathroom?  Little fingers in the cotton candy sneaking a taste when Michelle and I were making rewards for the accelerated reader program.

I have so many more memories that I could share tonight. But, the important thing I want you to remember is that you are unique individuals with unique gifts and talents. I want to encourage you to seek after and develop your strongest gifts and talents. Don’t be afraid to step out and take a chance on yourself. We are all so proud of you and who you have grown up to become and I want you to know that we will always be here for you, to talk, to listen or just to stand with you. We have faith in what you will accomplish and look forward to watching you continue to grow and learn and become all you can become.

I read a quote one day in the bathroom at the Middle School from someone that brings us all back to the beginning. Dr. Seuss wrote “Don’t cry because it’s over; smile because it happened.” You all have given me so many smiles.

Thank you