GRADUATION SPEECH

FOR

MISTER FINLEY

Hello everyone!!! It’s wonderful to be here to honor and congratulate all of you graduates and to spend a little time here at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ High School. (**If there is anyone in particular you would like to acknowledge, you can do that here**) I would take a moment and thank \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for inviting me to speak I would also like to say that I grew up in this neighborhood. I know what it’s like to have lived here and I have a feeling I know what some of you have experienced to get through these past several years of school. I’m sure you’ve faced obstacles and hardships and as young people it may seem that life is tough and unfair. More often than not I have a feeling you think, “Why bother?? I can’t get through this.”...And that was probably only because of a Social Studies test!! (**Wait for the laugh**). Wait until you get out into the “real” world!! In all seriousness and sincerity, I have a few things to say about that:

Number 1. Life is not fair…. for **ANYONE**. Remove the word from your vocabulary unless you’re talking about how much it costs to get on a bus. (If **you want, say that with enthusiasm and wait for the laugh**)

Number 2. As you get older and as you have more experiences in life, you will find that “obstacles” and “roadblocks” are your greatest teachers. You will see that it is the moments in which you had to really stop and think, consider all angles and possibilities of a situation, and weigh what the best solutions might be that really teach you. Sometimes when we are in seemingly impossible, dangerous, or scary situations, it is our inner survivor that gets us through. When we learn how to think things through and to act with maturity, integrity, and common sense… or at least a sharpened sense of survival, that is when we learn what life is about. And it is in those really tough lessons that we learn to trust ourselves based on how we get through them.

Number 3. You’re sitting here today!! You’ve done it!!! You’ve overcome more than a few obstacles, and whether you want to admit it or not, you’ve set goals and you’ve reached them!! You’ve graduated from high school!! That’s an amazing accomplishment and I want each one of you graduates to know that **WE** know that is no small feat.

Michael Jordan once said, “If you’re trying to achieve, there will be roadblocks. I’ve had them; everybody has had them. But obstacles don’t have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don’t turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.” He knows a thing or two about roadblocks and obstacles… he was born in Brooklyn!! (**Wait for the laugh**). The neighborhood in which he was born is so bad that it was the worst part of the worst section of the worst borough in NY, and although he was only a baby when his family moved, it seems like he might have inherited his strength and determination from those very early years. In an article I read about his old neighborhood, the building in which he was born became a homeless shelter after he and his family left. A young man that lived in the neighborhood was interviewed and he told the reporter that out of his seven closest childhood friends, three were dead and four were in prison. Think about it. You know now that you have a choice in life and you can choose to value and respect life and use your education to find your inner strength and focus. I want to point something out to all of you. That determination and spirit, and will to succeed lives within all of you and now that you are graduating from high school you are sharpening the skills and vision to go out in the world and claim your future.

Keep in mind that I grew up here. (**Do you want to add some personal memories of growing up in the neighborhood? If so, give me some notes about two or three incidents or memories that you have from your youth and I will add here**) I remember when I was growing up here \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. It’s no secret that this neighborhood has had its challenges. Yes, that’s one way to put it, but one of the reasons that those challenges and crime and poverty have had a chance to exist is because of ignorance….. Because not enough people got together to say, “We are stronger than that.” Thanks to your hard work, efforts and determination, you have the power to fight that ignorance with information, education, determination, and commitment to a better future for those who will follow in your path. The only way to stop a vicious cycle of any kind is to not allow it to exist…. to cut off its lifelines and “food supply.” Because of the achievements you have made leading up to today, you are gaining the tools that will prepare you to fight for your own personal success in life and for that of your community. You have what it takes to make your mark in this world in a positive way. I want all of you to know that **you are important**. Your thoughts and actions matter. Your contribution makes a difference in this world, so consider the impact and impression you leave on those around you. As you continue to gain knowledge and experience in the world around you, you will learn how to use your influence for good. You will see how that influence and confidence are a powerful force to inspire change in others.

Frederick Douglass said, “Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.” We have all seen that this is true, but now as you enter the world as adults, it is **YOUR** turn to live your lives and serve your families, friends, and community in such a way that vicious cycles **can** and **will** be broken.

Some of you are probably getting uncomfortable at this point… That’s **GREAT**!!! It means you **care**. It means that you **KNOW** it is up to you and your friends and colleagues in this class to, as Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in this world. It is no secret that there are many, **MANY** problems all around us, and because there is so much attention paid to the news, and because we are all so connected, sometimes it feels like conditions are getting worse. I invite you to consider this…. we may know more about the bad things that go on in this world and we may see that news travels faster than ever, but the **GOOD** news is that we can learn to put new forms of communication and contact to use to support our communities. Ignorance thrives in a vacuum…. Conditions in deprived neighborhoods are bad because there doesn’t seem to be a way to share the light of knowledge and wisdom. Guess what? Now that you have your high school diplomas, there is a chance for **YOUR** light to shine on your families, friends, and neighbors. Think about it… what would **YOUR** plan be to make your world a better place? If you could do anything… if circumstances were not in the way and you could find the means to make a difference in this world and in the future, what would you choose to do?

Someone once said that, “Setting goals turns the invisible to the visible.” Before you have a thought, it doesn’t exist. And then you have an idea…. EUREKA!!! Now the question is…. are you going to bury that idea or build upon it? How does one small thought have the potential to create miracles?

Let me give you an example. There is a popular online blog called “Humans of New York.” It began a few years ago as its creator, Brandon Stanton, interviewed strangers on the street. He took their pictures and posted a statement about each person. Some were funny. Some were sad. All were very human and had the potential to be inspiring. One day last year he stopped a young boy named Vidal and asked him to name an important person in his life. He named the principal of his school, a woman named. Ms. Lopez. He explained her positive influence… keep in mind that this school has its challenges. 85% of the students are African Americans from poor neighborhoods. Vidal explained, “When we get into trouble, she doesn’t suspend us. She calls us to her office and explains that society was built down around us. And she tells us that each time somebody fails out of school, a new jail cell gets built. One time she made every student stand up, one at a time, and she told each one of us that we matter.” Ms Lopez calls her students “scholars.” She makes sure they understand what respect is…. not with a heavy hand but with that same **RESPECT**. Ms Lopez herself was frustrated and ready to give up hope when she found out that Vidal met Brandon and was interviewed for this blog. To summarize the impact of this woman and her positive influence on this young man, through the incredible attention that Vidal’s story got, both he and Ms. Lopez were invited to Washington DC and met with President Obama. Ms Lopez also has a program in which she would do her best to raise enough money to take her leading “scholars” to visit Harvard University so they might get a taste of what determination, focus and commitment to a better life might get them. The post was so successful that over ONE MILLION DOLLARS has been raised and a foundation was started so that all of the students at Mott Hall Bridges Academy can go and visit Harvard … and maybe even attend and graduate.

That all came from one idea…. one idea that inspired a young man who acknowledged that the principal of his school was **THAT** important to him…. and it all happened just as she was about to give up and quit because it all seemed too difficult; too challenging.

Brandon Stanton, Vidal, and Ms Lopez are no different than any one of you. They have had seemingly insurmountable challenges in their lives. Life is hard. It’s tempting to give up. But each person had an idea and saw the power and the value for themselves and more important, their communities, and they shared their ideas and they focused and pursued, and didn’t give up on their dreams. This is just one small example of the possibilities that are out there when you believe in yourselves, you set goals, you show respect for others, you honor your fellow human beings, and you focus on making a difference in this world.

Each one of you is **THAT** important. You just may not fully know it yet, but you are on the path to discovering your strength, power, and dignity. As you leave \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ High School for what will probably be the last time, think about what your education and your time here has meant to you. Think about how you intend to make your positive mark on this world… and if that’s too overwhelming, think about how you will matter in your community, your family, how you will live a life that inspires your friends. As you leave here today also think about the question that Brandon Asked Vidal. Who is the most important and influential person in **YOUR** life? Now think about others around you being asked the same… wouldn’t it be amazing if someone said that **YOU** are the most influential and important person to them? It’s possible… when you live your life informed, educated, curious, and dedicated to a better world in the future.

I want to congratulate all of you on the occasion of your graduation. Remember that this event is known as **COMMENCEMENT** because it is truly the beginning of your life as adults. I wish each one of you only the best for a positive, successful future. Thank you all!