**GRADUATION SPEECH**

**FOR**

**SHERRYL OLSON**

To friends and neighbors, family, faculty, and administrators, distinguished guests, and, of course, graduates, if you’re within the sound of my voice.... by **ANY** means or methods of conveyance.... know that this is a **rare** moment to celebrate... Sure, we have a great graduating class, but more to the point, we figured out how to use this technology!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). Knowing how much my students cherish my wit and **PHENOMENAL** sense of humor, I feel that it’s my duty to provide some for all of you.... Oh dear... I hope you’re **laughing**!!! (**Wait for the laugh**).

Life has certainly thrown every one of us a couple of **GIANT** curve balls over the last few months, but one thing hasn’t changed in this very new and strange world we are all inhabiting together. Graduates, we are here to **celebrate** YOU!! For the past few months, I’ve often asked myself, “**WHY ME**???” We’ve all gotten more existential as the time has passed, with good reason, but my question has been more immediate... like, why **ME**???... **here**, speaking to you... **now**... The answer is probably simpler and more practical than you might think... or already know... I’m not only **hopefully** your favorite calculus teacher, here at Stephen Decatur High School, I am also a graduate.... and yes... it gets better... in the world of “six degrees of separation” or “teenage geography....” you know... that’s the game in which you grow up and see how many “kids” from your early school career wind up in your adult, professional circle, and, well, when I play that game, up pops the name, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. He was a senior here at Decatur and I was a freshman... and like it was yesterday, here we are together again...Yes...our superintendent and I were here, in this school, **\*/#$)& years ago.**.. Who would have **ever** thought we would be where we are today... and did the 17 year old me ever expect to be delivering this commencement speech?

So here we are... adapting to new circumstances while honoring age old traditions. I am blessed to teach for the school system and at the high school where I received my own education, and the best part is that I get to give back to the community that gave so much to me. As I walk or **walked** through the halls of the building, I remember what high school was like for me... the history comes alive each time I see a classroom full of faces... let’s clarify that... a **ZOOM** classroom full of your eager faces... and it takes me back...

I’ve realized throughout the years, through the tests and trials of life and career, that teaching is my calling and passion. Each year, I have the privilege of working with terrific students.... and while the lessons may convey the same principles, each class and each individual student is unique, and each graduating class is comprised of individuals, mostly eager, sometimes anxious, who stand on the edge of the rest of their lives.... Graduates, this year finds you in an unprecedented space.... One may call it a predicament. I call it the opportunity of a lifetime. We have all been given a gift.... of **time**. Time to step back. Time to imagine what will be. Time to learn what it means to really be “on your honor,” to do the necessary work... with no teacher technically standing over your shoulder... in order to achieve.... not because “you’re supposed to,” but because you realize the lessons you learn are designed to enrich your lives, inform you, and give you the necessary tools to really determine where and how you will make your mark in this world. In a way, current global conditions are forcing you... and all of us... to take notes... listen to your heart... your gut... to build your strengths and **find your passion**. Graduating from high school provides a giant step to independence.... and to acknowledging what it means to honor yourselves and your future.

Those of you that know me know one simple fact...my philosophy in the classroom is the same as my philosophy of life... Work hard... commit to understanding... find a way to “bond” with the information, and act accordingly, solving the problems the best you can. You are in school to **learn**... you will not always have the perfect solution... you will not **always** “nail **IT**”... or **anything**... on the first try, but know that mistakes are your most valued teacher.... Take responsibility for the error made. Remember what it felt like to miss that mark. Figure out the way to make the correction, and then **DO IT**. Own your actions. Be accountable and responsible... in every aspect of your lives, and remember my favorite saying... “Mistakes are **expected**, **respected**, **inspected**, and **corrected”**..... This philosophy will take you anywhere you need to go in life. There’s one other golden rule I believe in strongly, one that has been able to be highlighted during the pandemic when so many of us are isolated or removed from our friends... our tribe... our class... Don’t compare yourselves to others...your greatest competition is **YOU**. Your job is to produce results... with regard to being interested and engaged... understanding the work... finding the way to absorb the concepts and formulas throughout your education and, of course, throughout life, and you will see, your chief responsibility is to make sure you are stronger... more aware... and more confident in your skills and knowledge than you were the day before. **YOU** are your greatest competition. There’s no one else out there... (**If you want to make a joke, you can say**)... **REALLY**... and don’t we all know that **NOW**??? (**And wait for the laugh**). Compare yourselves only to who you were **yesterday** and **GO FOR IT.**

Yes... we live in strange, unprecedented times, but that doesn’t mean that this period isn’t also fascinating. We are seeing the world change before our eyes and if we’re really smart, creative and resilient, there isn’t anything we cannot accomplish. Never forget that Newton invented calculus during a pandemic and back then, he was **REALLY** isolated!! But he had the gift of time... time to concentrate... focus... test his theories... maybe get hit on the head with an apple ... and **I DON’T MEAN** an iPhone!! . (**Wait for the laugh**).... imagine what you can accomplish... working through this, exercising curiosity, and learning to adapt to current, unexpected conditions.

Also remember that each successive generation has its challenges.... made more bearable by inventions and contemporary conveniences. Your great grandparents walked miles to school in the snow...schools were not closed for fog or weather....back in **MY** day.... we didn’t have our own phones... they were stuck to a wall and had a long cord...there was no texting... no such thing as a screenshot... faxes were barely invented... I know... “What’s a **FAX**???” (**Wait for the laugh**). In this era, now **YOU** have a story to tell your grandchildren... Every generation has its defining moments... from the moon walk in the 60’s to the AIDS crisis in the 80’s and 90’s, 9/11 in the early aughts... this is yours... and the next generations will be influenced by the way you rise to the challenge... as individuals and as a collective community, and hopefully future generations will learn from our struggles... and figure out how to find abundance in the simple things... like toilet paper.... disinfecting wipes... hand sanitizer... (**Wait for the laugh**).

Thanks to Newton and his isolation, we have the mathematical tools to figure out probability, percentages, likelihood... how people are affected proportionately (**Please clarify this if my wording is not accurate**). We are lucky to live in a community that is so supportive of each other. We come together for those in need, and the care and generosity is reflected in countless donations and numerous school events and fundraisers, as well as scholarships for local students.  While this pandemic has brought about feelings of loss... from prom, to sports events, traditional graduation ceremonies, and family celebrations, such as weddings that have been postponed, know that something better, probably different, lies ahead. As we mourn the loss of these special events that we have looked forward to we also have found a new sense of hope, family, and a greater sense of community. Maya Angelou has said, “We spend precious hours fearing the inevitable. It would be wise to use that time adoring our families, cherishing our friends, and living our lives.” I promise you... your day will come... you are learning to celebrate in new ways.

This crisis has allowed us to slow down, ease up, and spend time with those we really care about and the effects are becoming clear... literally. The environment is also reaping benefits.  When I visited Venice in 2005, the water was murky and full of pollution...Have you seen recent pictures of the Venice canals??? The water is clear and blue and people have even spotted, for the first time in years, marine life swimming around.

Graduates, it’s now your turn to inherit the future.... it’s your turn to create the vision that includes “making it work,” finding the way to fulfillment through challenge, discovering your voice and how to use it for yourselves, your families, and your community. If we’re really smart, we learn from the curve balls life throws at us. We learn to duck and we learn to prevail. Also remember you are not alone. We’re in this together. I cannot wait to see how each one of you goes forward to make your mark. I wish all of you the heartiest of congratulations and the hope that when you look back on this moment in time, you will see you have been creative, resourceful, fulfilled, and resilient. Thank you all!!