**GRADUATION SPEECH**

**FOR**

**CHENDRA DUPREE**

Greetings and welcome!!

I want to acknowledge and thank all of you for being here today. To our Board President Juawn Jackson, Central Zone board member Thelma Dillard, distinguished board members, our Superintendent Dr. Dan Sims….. to all the parents , family, friends, students, teachers….. all other dignitaries and special guests …. you **KNOW** you’re **ALL** **SPECIAL GUESTS**!! (**Pause a bit and wait for the laugh**) and of course to the graduating class of 2023, it is so wonderful to see all of you, to be together, and to have the opportunity to celebrate at these commencement exercises!!!

The past four years have been very different for all of us, and especially for the graduating students we honor today. Who could have predicted, back in the “good ole days”…. I’m talking **2019**, mind you…. (**Wait for the laugh**), what was about to happen to our lives, our connections, and our opportunities… in our homes… our communities…. and most importantly, in our schools. Graduates, high school has a way of presenting its “opportunities for growth,” and by that I mean **challenges**, and for all of you….. well… let’s be real…. you students hit the **JACKPOT**!!! It didn’t always seem like a prize, mainly because it wasn’t, but the bottom line…. the truth of the situation is that you made it through…. You’re here today, standing on the threshold of the beginning of your adult lives, and I don’t know that I was ever more proud….. or in awe of…. a graduating class!!!

The high school experience is all about learning…. Actually **learning to learn**… and graduates, that is exactly what you did!!! While it didn’t look so pretty while we were in the thick of the pandemic, you found a way to get to **this** point. You did the work… you accepted… maybe sometimes reluctantly…. as did we all… that there was a “new normal” to adjust to, but you know what? Through the weirdness and the growing pains, on top of the really big challenges you were **already** facing, you found the path to adaptability, knowledge, and ultimately, survival. I’m sure many of you have heard the expression, “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade??” Well, as I look at all of you and I think of all that you’ve managed to accomplish and how you persevered, through some **really** tough times, I am so proud of the delicious, abundant, satisfying lemonade you’ve all made!!!

Throughout the past four years, most of that time we had no choice but to be isolated, separated, forced to figure things out on our own, different parts of our **selves** grew. We missed being together, but we learned to adapt… to be creative… to find the ways to “make it work” as the tagline of a well known TV show teaches us. In a very substantial way, that experience was a gift… our lemonade, if you will. It taught us that, as difficult it is to understand, we are stronger than our circumstances… **YOU** are stronger than your circumstances. And through it, were threads that connected us… as a school…. as a community, and here we are. I am fascinated at the way new kinds of connections have been formed, borne from the need to find new ways to bridge the distance we may have felt. I’m particularly moved by the idea of choosing a class song…. And what a choice it is!!! In Wiz Khalifa’s, “See You Again,” he says the words I’m sure we all feel…

“It’s been a long day without you, my friend

And I'll tell you all about it when I see you again (**I'll see you again**)

We've come a long way (yeah, we came a long way)

From where we began ….

Oh I’ll tell you about it when I see you again”

Graduates, you are leaving Central Fine Arts and you’re moving on to the next chapters. Knowing that you’re at this point in your lives reminds me of something Michelle Obama expressed in her book, **Becoming**. She said, “For me, Becoming isn’t about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as a forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey doesn’t end.” We are all “becoming” at every step of our path in life. It’s taken you four years to become graduates. Now you take what you’ve learned… what you’ve experienced…. and you will use that in the process of becoming more aware, more wise, more adaptable, more true to yourselves. Throughout life, we never stop learning and whether it’s small things or monumental, life changing revelations, your high school education solidifies how you will approach the future… how you will continue to deal with “becoming.”

I know I speak for everyone here …. parents, family, friends, teachers, distinguished guests, when I say we are rooting for you… we applaud you for being here and we encourage you on your chosen paths to becoming the people you are destined to be. Education… knowledge… wisdom… are the greatest tools we can possess as we build our lives going forward. On behalf of all of us present, I congratulate you and wish for you only the best in the future. Thank you all!!