**AWARDS SPEECH**

**FOR**

**LARK WILL**

Hello everyone!!! I know I probably say this every year but I’ll say it again, it’s so great to be back here, at my alma mater, Bishop Kenny High School, representing my family, honoring my father’s legacy, and acknowledging, not only you, this year’s graduates, but the entire Bishop Kenny student body. Whether you’re graduating today or aspiring to achieve goals and break records previously set by those who precede you, I know I speak for my family, the teachers, administrators, your families and friends when I say we are all so proud to be a part of this ever expanding tradition….

As you know, first hand, if you’d met him, you can probably tell, my father, John J. Will was an extraordinary man. He had his priorities very clear and honored them throughout his life. He was devoted to his family, his love of science, and his belief in the power of women and the difference they can and **WILL** make in this world… if given the chance and a level playing field. My sister, Mary Lou and I were so blessed to have such a powerful mentor, so close to home…. **IN** our home, as a matter of fact… (**Wait for the laugh**). We were raised in an environment that nurtured and honored confidence, common sense, integrity, and the innate knowledge that we were capable of achieving whatever we set our minds to.  John Will believed that **ALL** kids deserved encouragement, but he was keenly aware of gender imbalance and was determined to advocate for a level playing field... one in which girls had... and **have** the freedom and the respect to participate as completely as their male counterparts. Please don’t misinterpret this concept.... for my father, it was about **representation**, sharing unique perspectives, getting a “fair shake,” and knowing that honoring diversity provides a path to unimaginable discoveries. To all of the fathers, grandfathers, big brothers, uncles…**ALL** of you, know that your encouragement of young women goes a long way.

Over the past several years, impressive inroads have been made in acknowledging and encouraging gender equality, and that is a very, **VERY** good thing. Last year, so many of us got swept up in the “Barbie phenomenon…” Talk about a rush of “Pink Power!!” (**Wait for the laugh**). But something even more important was born from that explosion of attention around a “living doll.” Mattel, the parent company of the Barbie juggernaut, has initiated the Dream Gap Project whose mission it is to “close the gap between girls and their full potential.” In a wonderful video, featuring little girls, each filling in a bit of explanation about the project, they collectively state that “we need to close the dream gap…. It’s up to **ALL** of us…” I never really thought of myself as a “Barbie” but I am very proud and gratified that the work we do here…. The endowment we have established in my father’s name, supports the concept and the necessary actions needed to closing that dream gap. We need to “see brilliant women being brilliant… and to imagine ourselves doing what they do.” That says it all. That’s why we’re here. That’s why it’s so important that while we work to support the closing of the dream gap, the truth is we cannot do it alone…. And we appreciate all of those brothers, fathers, uncles, and grandpas in working with us to discover full potential for **all**.

I am also proud to acknowledge that our citizens of Jacksonville are on their way to closing that dream gap….not only have we elected our first female mayor, Donna Deegan, she too, is a graduate of Bishop Kenny!!! Mayor Deegan graduated two years after me and is doing her part to illustrate and highlight the impact that smart, strong, determined women can make on this world. And that’s not all… the impact of women’s leadership is being seen as a force that can’t be denied. In a study commissioned by Wells Fargo, 2024 Impact of Women Owned Businesses, it was reported that “between 2019 and 2023, the number of women owned businesses increased at nearly double the rate of those owned by men.” From 2022 to 2023, that ratio grew to 4.5 times!!! It’s time to believe we’re **UNSTOPPABLE**!!!

…. And while we all know that our school years can be tough… Bishop Kenny has historically demanded high standards of its students, we can see that with a great education and proper encouragement, the sky is the limit when it comes to fulfilling our potential as adults and professionals … in **ANY** field we choose. It’s also why I’m so proud to introduce this year’s recipient of the John J. Will Science and Technology Memorial Scholarship. (**Add here**) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Another year is “in the books” for the students of Bishop Kenny. Another year closer to closing that “dream gap.” Another year closer to the time when all people have equal potential and an even playing field. It is with enormous gratitude and intention that my family and I continue to support the wonderful students and graduates of this fine school and I **CANNOT WAIT** to witness the difference **ALL OF YOU** will make in this world!! Thank you all!!!