

146th Commencement
Gardner High School – Gardner Academy for Learning and Technology
Joint Ceremony



Mayor Michael J. Nicholson, JD
Commencement Address
June 5th, 2021 – 10:00 AM – Watkins Field



Good Morning,

President Girouard, Class Officers, Dr. Pellegrino, members of the School Committee, Ny Nguyen, City Council President Elizabeth Kazinskas, Congressman McDer... I mean Jack McDermott, family, friends, honored guests, and most importantly today, the class of 2021.

I'd like to start off by recognizing our students who after receiving their diplomas today will be going off to serve our nation in the armed forces and would ask those students to please stand. Thank you for your willingness to serve and protect us all and this great nation.

I'll be honest, writing this speech was a lot more difficult than I had originally expected it to be. You see, I feel a close connection to you all. Exactly two weeks ago today, I was at my own graduation ceremony at Fenway Park graduating from law school. I know what four long years of school feels like, and hopefully this speech won't feel longer than those.

To build off of our shared experience, I'd like to share with you a piece of advice that the commencement speaker at my graduation, Judge Serge Georges from the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, said to us- "tomorrow morning, when all the excitement of today's activities, all of the parties, the celebrations, or even the feelings of melancholy for ending this chapter in your life fade away, get up, get outside, and just go for a walk."

You see, I could stand here today and tell you to go out there, make your City proud, reach for the stars, and get that high paying job with a penthouse office. But I'm not going to. I'm not going to, because there are some issues with those statements. You see for the past 12 years, you've been on a treadmill here. A treadmill is mechanical. It keeps you moving at a certain pace and if you don't keep moving forward, it'll push you until you keep up with it or fall off.

While things have certainly changed over the past 12 years, you've kept a pretty consistent routine. You woke up, went to school, did work in your classes, went home, hopefully did your homework, and went to sleep, with maybe a couple of fun activities thrown into the day as well. You also had people there - your parents, guardians, teachers, and friends - to keep pushing you forward, and that's how you got here. But as you end this chapter in your lives, get off the treadmill, and go for that walk- set your own pace, clear your mind, and reflect on what got you here, who got you here, and where you want to go now that you're setting your pace without the machine underneath you.

Far too many people tell us that success can only be obtained by following certain steps. But if you don't do something you're truly passionate about, that your heart just isn't in, is it really worth it? Instead of letting the treadmill drive you, drive at your own pace. Find out what makes you motivated. What makes you, you.

You don't need to get a specific job or go to a certain school, study a specific subject, and make a lot of money to be happy. If you start out as a business major, but after going for a walk and clearing your mind you find art is your calling, go be an artist. If you want to be a doctor, but you find out nursing may be better suited for you, then go be the best nurse there is. And even within the specific field that you choose- not all doctors are surgeons, not all lawyers are in a courtroom, and not all scientists are in a lab. Sometimes somebody who went to college to be a high school history teacher gets elected the mayor of his hometown. But so long as you do something that you find rewarding, that makes you smile, that gives you satisfaction and enjoyment even when the work is hard and stressful, then you've also found yourself.

Don't let anybody tell you that the items listed on your resume define who you are. It's your drive, passion, and attitude that define you. Don't let anyone tell you that just because you've gone down a certain path, you have to continue on it. Don't let anyone tell you that change is synonymous with failure, because in reality, it's growth.

We've all heard the famous phrase "you only live once," but the second line that gets cut off every time is almost more important. "You only live once, but if you live it right, once is enough." Most of all don't let anyone tell you you're too young, that you need to wait your turn, because in reality you've already started making your imprint on the world.

Ask yourself those difficult questions, "what am I doing?", "just because I'm good at this, is this still what I want to do?", "why am I doing it?", "who am I doing this for?", "is this making me happy?" If it doesn't feel right, if it seems like a means to an end rather than something you enjoy, then you owe it to yourself to try something new. But if on those walks you find that you're doing exactly what you want to do and should be doing, then hold your head high and keep going.

Now I say walks in the plural, because there will likely a few times you'll have to take a walk to clear your head. In this next chapter you'll have a lot more choices to make on your own. Not all of the options will be good, and some can lead you down a path that may be difficult to deal with. So take the time you deserve to give yourself and do what's right. And if you make a mistake, oh well, you learned something and have a support system of all of us here to help you when you need it.

When I started this speech I also told you I wouldn't tell you to go out there and make Gardner proud. The reason I didn't tell you that is because you already have. Just look at the classmates around you- Hannah Levesque will be starting college at Fitchburg State University bringing with her 59 credits earned in our Early College Program, Caleb Para helping inform the residents of our City about our historical locations through his Eagle Scout Project, or Kiarah Moore and Julie Richard's great taste in music. You have all taken the challenges and adversity that has come your way - medical diagnoses, changes in your home situations, a global pandemic, telling

people who you are, or maybe even grades that may not have been what you were hoping for – but you stood strong, made it through all of that, and accomplished more than you may realize.

If you go to school or get a job first and you find out you're in the perfect program at the perfect school or you have a career doing what you love- we're proud of you. If you find out you need a break or a change in career, end up in a different major, or at a different school entirely, we're still equally as proud of you, because in all of these cases you stayed true to yourself, and we couldn't be more proud of that.

So go write that book, paint that picture, discover new medical frontiers, open a restaurant, practice your musical skills, teach kids how to dance, coach an athletic team, run for office, and be yourself. Because if that's what makes your heart sing and you feel happy, do it- that's more important than any job title or amount on a paycheck.

And while you're on that walk- don't forget to think about the people who got you here today. Your parents, guardians, siblings, friends, relatives, teachers, and mentors. The people you're thinking of now impacted your lives because they love you. Because they wanted to see you succeed because they knew you had it in you.

Para los estudiantes que como yo, vienen de familias que inmigraron a este país, aprendieron un nuevo idioma, tomaron nuevas ocupaciones e hicieron esta ciudad su nuevo hogar. Nunca olvides los sacrificios que tus seres queridos hicieron que te llevaron a esta ceremonia. Verte aquí hoy, celebrando tus logros, muestra que todos sus sacrificios valieron la pena. Al seguir adelante, recuerda sus historias y recuerda las palabras de este poema:

Sigo pa'lante, por mi tierra y mis hijos
Echando pa'lante, haciendo destino
Yo tengo recuerdos que han hecho historia
Lo Sabe Mi Alma, y mi Memoria
Yo tengo mi pueblo, este gran pueblo mio
Sigo pa'lante, y siempre me encuentra entre amigos

Translation of above:

(To those student who, like me, come from families that immigrated to this country, learned a new language, took on new jobs, and made this city their new home: never forget the sacrifices that your loved ones made to get you to this ceremony. Seeing you here today, celebrating your achievements, shows that all of the sacrifices they made were all worth it. As you move forward remember your stories and remember the words of this poem:

*I move forward for my land and my children
I push myself forward, creating new destinations
I have memories that form my history
That I keep within my soul and my memory
I have my people, my great town
I move forward, and you can always find me among friends.)*

To every person who has helped make you who you are today, I ask you now graduates, to give them a round of applause and thank them for helping you find yourself and set you on this new path.

Now as you walk across this stage here you'll officially become alumni of Gardner High School but that doesn't mean you have to leave us behind. Gardner is and will always be your home. We'll always be proud of you, no matter what you do or where you end up, and you are always welcome back here to stop by, and take a walk.

Thank you.