

City Honors School
Commencement Exercises
June 26, 2025

Key Note Address
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Family and Friends, Teachers, Alumni and graduates - thank you so much for having me. It is an absolute honor to be here.

When I asked Dr. Kresse his advice for today, he said: "Brief but powerful is my motto for ceremonies and speeches. Leave them in tears, not exhausted."

My takeaway is that no one has ever gone to one of these events and been upset that it ended early - so I will try and be fast.

I am only going to talk about two things.

Here is Thing One:

I came across a quote, "You came here as children, you leave as adults." I'm not sure that when I graduated from City Honors way back in 1985, at 17 years old, that I was really an adult, but when I got here, I was definitely a child.

Many of you started here in 5th grade. I started in 7th. Before that, I spent my early middle school years at Mount Saint Joe's Academy - which is no longer a place - on the Medaille College campus - which is also no longer a place.

I wasn't Catholic, but I spent five years being taught by nuns and I did amazing. I pretty much got straight E's - for excellent! Not sure when A's took over grading on the grading scale, but anyhow, I was definitely among the best and brightest at Mount Saint Joe's Academy... and then I came to City Honors.

At my old school, French class was memorizing vocabulary lists. At City Honors, they were reading, writing and speaking French. I was completely lost. And it was like this for every other subject.

I was at a new school. I didn't have any friends and I felt stupid. We talk a lot about mental health now, but back then, the anxiety I felt every day, before going to school, I kept to myself.

My amazing parents saw the change in my behavior and, of course, in my grades and got me after school help in math and French and, by the time eighth grade rolled around, things were starting to get a little better.

I had made a few friends. My grades were improving. But I would say that I was still struggling.

Now, I don't know how 8th grade moving up day is now. I don't remember if we even called it "Moving Up Day" then. But, back then, teachers gave out an award of excellence for each subject. If you were the best eighth grade math student, you got the math award.

And despite being barely a B student, I was given the social studies award. I didn't get the best grades, but I really liked history - and I asked a lot of questions. My teacher would be talking about the French Revolution and I would annoyingly raise my hand and ask, " Hey, what was going on in Asia right now?"

So I was that guy. But, I was engaged and inquisitive, and so my 8th grade social studies teacher, John Grandits, saw something special in me and gave me the social studies award.

And, after that, things changed. I became more confident. I tried harder. I studied more and I liked going to school. I did pretty well in high school, graduated, and then off I went to the University of Buffalo. Which, to me, seemed wayyyyyy easier than City Honors. In fact, I would have gotten a 4.0 GPA, which is like Straight E's, if it wasn't for my arch enemy....Oceanography.

Here's a tip. Do not take racquetball class at 8 o'clock in the morning and then follow it up with Oceanography. I would literally hold my eye lids open to try and stay awake.

Anyhow. I graduated with honors, and then did what anyone with a Liberal Arts degree would do... I opened a baseball card store. Which is a story for another day.

But here is what I want you to take away from this. My teacher, John Grandits, with one simple act, changed the course of my life.

So graduates, here is what I ask of you. Whether in the moment, or years later, when you realize that someone has changed your life for the better, please thank them for what they did and tell them what it meant for you.

So, over the years I have stayed in touch with Mr. Grandits. After he retired in 2005, he came back to help coach the middle and high school baseball teams until 2023.

He recently got married. She's great. I hung out with them last week at the Party on the Wharf. And yes, I have thanked him for what he did and told him what it meant to me - maybe not in this many words - but I did - and I hope that, as you make your way through life, that you thank the people who made your life better.

By the way, even 45 years later, it still doesn't feel normal calling Mr. Grandits "John." You will never get used to calling your teachers by their first names. I promise you this is true.

So that was thing one. Here comes Thing Two. And Thing Two is shorter.

So, I have had times in my life when I cared mostly about myself, and there have been times in my life when I cared more about others; better times. As I stand here at nearly 58 years old, I'd like to give you the advice to strike a balance between the two.

It seems to me that, more than I can ever recall, that many of us view people as problems. Compassion, understanding, empathy have been thrown right out of the window. I was taught that you never judge someone until you have walked a mile in their shoes.

I am no saint. I have enjoyed my life. And I hope that you all live amazing lives. But as I have gotten older, I have tried to embrace the importance of helping others. Even if they look different than me. Even if they are from somewhere different than me. Even if they have beliefs different than mine.

So be good to yourself and be kind to others. It's not rocket science. It's not even a new concept for graduation speeches. In fact, just last year a billionaire basically said this same thing in his commencement speech to the graduates of UMass Dartmouth, and then he gave them all envelopes with \$1000 in cash.

He told them to keep half for themselves, and use the other half to help someone who needed it more than they did.

Be good to yourself. Be kind to others.

Just to be clear, I am personally not going to be giving you all envelopes full of money today.

However...I did reach out to some Western NY business leaders, and some members of the class of 1985, and through their collective generosity today, each of you will each be receiving \$1000 in cash.

Now don't get too excited. Many of you are under 18, so technically I have to hand the money to a parent or guardian. But I'm guessing if they are here to support you, they probably love you a little bit and will give you the money.

Assuming that they do, the message is the same. City Honors is hard. You're wearing robes and a funny hat. You graduated. You did it. \$500 is for you. You absolutely deserve it.

And then, please, take the other \$500 and give it to a charity, or a cause, or a person who could use it more than you and afterward, let's see how it makes you feel.

Well. That's all I've got for you tonight.

Thank you so much for having me!

Good luck to you all.

Good Night.

Go Bills!