

Mary Miller's remarks
Presentation High School graduation
May 30, 2009

Good morning.

Before beginning my remarks to the soon-to-be-graduates, I want to take this final opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to the parents of the Class of 2009. It takes a lot of courage to raise children, to teach them, to give them proper attention, to mold their character and make them good people with strong values. It takes strength and courage to watch them develop their own ideas—separate from yours—and to accept them as they become the person they were meant to be. And it takes an infinite amount of courage to let them go.

Today they are not just leaving high school; they are leaving their childhood. They have accomplished so much, but they could not have done it without you – nor could we! Together we gave them roots and wings, and they are ready to fly.

Graduating seniors, getting you ready to leave the nest has not always been easy, so we need to honor your parents and family members for their commitment and sacrifices, for their love and support. And we also want to remember parents and loved ones whose absence today makes graduation inevitably less complete for some of you. They are here in spirit. So members of the Class of 2009, please join me in thanking your families.

And let's not forget the faculty. These past four years, you have spent as much time with them as with your family. They are the people who have taken you seriously (even when you were pretty silly), cared for you, worried about you, worked with you, spent long hours talking with you and listening to you; they smacked and were smack-downed on Fridays. Like Michelangelo they saw and believed that in every huge chunk of marble (no matter how rough) there was a unique statue waiting to emerge. I ask the faculty and staff of Pres. to stand, so we can all show them our appreciation.

Now, your turn.

I have done a lot of research about the long lasting impact of the graduation address; there is none. The sad truth is you will probably recall this ceremony years from now and realize that today, May 30, 2009, was the day you first began to forget everything you learned in high school. But, being the eternal optimist that I am, I am going to leave you with something else to forget. Consider this *my* last lecture.

My role as principal today is simple: to reflect with you for a few moments on your education at Pres. What kind of woman are you as a result of being here?

“To have a reason to get up in the morning it is necessary to possess a guiding principle; a belief of some kind.” (Judith Guest) Presentation has tried to encourage you to embrace some principles. Yes, we wanted to get you into college and prepare you to do well when

you get there. But Pres does not call itself a college preparatory – that vision is too small. Our real aim was to educate you for life!

We wanted you to be intellectually competent, so we worked you very hard and exposed you to an immense amount of knowledge. It was not easy, and we held you to high standards, not because we wanted you to suffer, but because life itself is challenging; and if you wish to prevail, not merely endure, you need to be disciplined and prepared to work hard.

But academic intellect is only half of what we hoped to develop in you. Intelligence by itself is not a value; what you do with your intelligence is what matters. After all, the Nazis were very intelligent people. A concentration camp survivor said it best: “My eyes have witnessed what no person should witness: Gas chambers built by *learned* engineers. Children poisoned by *educated* physicians. Infants murdered by *trained* nurses. Women and children shot and killed by *college graduates*. Reading and writing and spelling and history and math are only important if they serve to make students *human*.”

The other half of intelligence is moral intelligence – I like to call it character. And my favorite definition of character is “what you do when no one is looking.” Next year, no one will be looking – most of you will be away from home and the watchful eye of parents; teachers certainly will not hover over you the way the Pres faculty has; your college president will probably not know your name. The kind of human you will be is your choice – your responsibility. I pray your intellect and the moral compass we tried to develop in you will serve you well.

We have encouraged you to believe in yourself – that you are talented and smart and capable of accepting life’s challenges. That the biggest roadblock in your life consists of two words: “I can’t.” You are made in the image of God, so there is no reason to play small. When you leave here, you may encounter people who seek to control you and try to mold you into the image they want you to be. You may meet people who make themselves feel big by making you feel small. Remember the words of Eleanor Roosevelt: “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent – never give it!”

We have tried to make you feel pride in being a woman. No matter what you do with your life – wife, mother, doctor, engineer, business woman, teacher – it is important to remember one thing: Your No. 1 job on this earth will always be nurturer. Many times in life you will encounter things that cannot be “fixed” – a depressed friend, an aging family member, a dying patient. All you can do is show up and show you care. So many of you get that! I have watched you comfort each other, rally around a teacher who is sick or suffering, care enough to raise money for Darfur, walk for breast cancer research, write a letter with Amnesty International. That’s what real women do – they care.

We have pounded into your heads – and I hope your hearts – the catchy phrase “Not words but deeds.” Our human problems will not be improved by words, but by actions. And the most important actions are those done in service to others. Indeed, as we have been reminded this year: God has no other hands but ours! Martin Luther King, Jr., once

said: “Every person must decide whether she will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life’s most persistent question is, what are you doing for others?” There’s no community service requirement in life (just like Pres); no one can force you to care or get involved in fighting injustice. But, for me, there is nothing sadder than an 18 year old who is cynical or apathetic. Don’t let that be you. Never stop believing that you can make an impact in this world. Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Nano Nagle commanded no armies – they had no military power. Instead they commanded respect because they dared to dream of a better world and they had the courage to not be silenced.

I hope we reinforced in you the importance of faith in God. I said to many of you on Senior Retreat that I do not believe you can truly be happy without a belief in God – and I stand by those words.

You can be a strong person – with a healthy ego and a creative mind – but there will be times in your life when you do not have all the answers and human strength will fail, and only faith will carry you through. Faith is a gift, and I cannot give it to you. But God’s fingerprints are all around, if you only have eyes to see.

In big and small ways we have tried to give you a vision of life and an education that will help you live it well – to be independent thinkers; to make a difference in your society, your parish, your workplace, your family; to be compassionate, faith-filled, confident women; to see God in all things.

I hope these lessons (even more than English, math or science) have shaped the kind of woman you are. Like your parents, your teachers have planted seeds – the rest is up to you.

My friends, whether you knew it or not, you have been loved and cared for at Pres. I do hope you will come back often, because you are leaving a little part of yourself here. You will always be part of a special group of women: Pres alums, bound for life. A sisterhood. May God bless you and take care of you. Take care of yourself. And be careful – I want you to grow old enough to become wise. Work hard. Care about people, especially the poor and vulnerable. They need you to stand with them. Believe in yourself. Never stop learning. Notice the many blessings in your life. Let your deeds speak for themselves. Act justly. Walk humbly with your God. Refuse to be bullied by fear. Embrace hope. This is what it means to be a Pres girl – you have permission to forget the rest.

Congratulations, Class of 2009. Go make a difference.