

# WALT WHITMAN HIGH SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT MESSAGE FROM YOUR SUPERINTENDENT JULY 2011

Mr. Kaden, Members of the Board of Education, Administration, Faculty, Students, Parents, and Guests. Commencement speakers are supposed to give advice in their commencement speeches.

I am going to do just that this evening, but I'm not going to give you original advice. I've chosen material from an individual who has had a significant impact not just on individuals, but on American culture as a whole, Charles Schulz, the creator of the "Peanuts" comic strip.

Mr. Schulz made thousands of profound observations and gave advice every day for 50 years. When he died 11 and half years ago, his comic strip had been read by 350 million people in 2,600 newspapers in 75 countries. His observations and advice have been incorporated into 30 television specials, 4 movies, and an off-Broadway musical. In all, he wrote and drew over 18,000 Peanuts strips.

You need to know that, as a senior in high school, he submitted some of his comic strips to the yearbook for publication . . . They were all rejected.

Mr. Schulz had a very simple, yet profound, philosophy by which he lived his life and which he shared with us every day through the words of Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus, and my personal favorite, Snoopy. After reading several of his biographies, I found I completely agreed with his viewpoint about life. And it is his message I would like to share with you today.

I hope that you will find that you, too, think as Mr. Schulz does. And if you don't, maybe you need to question your current attitudes.

The fact is that graduation speakers are impediments to the real goal of the day, which is generally celebration rather than reflection. I ask you, when all the celebrating is done, that you take some time to reflect, that you do think, about what you are doing, where you are going, and why?

I share Mr. Schulz's thoughts with you using the same approach he did when he spoke at commencement ceremonies. I have questions that I would like each of you to answer.

Here are the questions:

For those of you who aspire to great wealth in your lifetime: Name the five wealthiest people in the world.

For those of you who aspire to success in the world of sports: Name the last five Heisman trophy winners.

For those of you who aspire to success in the worlds of literature, science, government service, or journalism: Name five people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize.

For those of you who aspire to careers in the entertainment industry: Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners for best actor and best actress.

How did you do?

How many of you were able to answer the question which covered your area of interest let alone the other questions. My guess is that you were able to come up with maybe one or two names, and even then, you weren't absolutely sure.

But, make no mistake about it. The people who achieved these awards and honors are not second-rate performers. They are the best in their respective fields. Very often, they have been chosen by their peers. Those that know first hand the intricacies of those achievements and the amount of dedications, talent, and expertise it takes to reach the very top of those professions.

Do not misunderstand me. There is absolutely nothing wrong with awards, recognition, and honors.

But the reality is: few of us remember the headlines of yesterday. Their achievements are certainly notable. But the applause dies. Awards tarnish. Achievements are forgotten. Accolades, fame, certificates, and trophies are often buried with their owners.

## Here are some more questions. See how you do on this one:

List two teachers who aided your journey through school.

Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time.

Name five people who have taught you something worthwhile.

Identify three people who have made you feel appreciated and special.

Name five people you enjoy spending time with.

Name half a dozen people you know whose stories have inspired you.

Easier? Why?

## The answer is simple. It is Mr. Schulz's philosophy of life:

The people who make a difference in our lives are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. The people who make a difference in your life, are not the people you read about, or watch on a television or movie screen. But rather, they are the ones that care.

They are the ones who take a moment to touch your life in some way. They are the ones who want to see you succeed, not for them, but for you. They are the ones who don't want you to make the same mistakes that they made. They are your parents, your family, your teachers, your friends. They are people you have yet to meet as you leave Walt Whitman to begin your life beyond South Huntington. They are the people who care more about other people than they do about receiving honors, awards, and recognition from others. And very often, because they do care more for others, they do receive the honors, awards, and recognition. But those honors, awards and recognition are not the reason they care.

Mr. Schulz's profound observation and life-altering commencement advice in a nutshell:

## Be one of those people yourselves . . . for the others you meet . . . Make a difference in the life of as many other people as you can.

This Class has participated in a numerous efforts for others. Whether it was the blood drives for the benefit of the American Red Cross, or the Relays for Life for the American Cancer Society, or for the earthquake and tsunami victims in Haiti and Japan.

After attending the Principal's List presentation, the PTA Council Scholarship Awards, and the Senior Awards Ceremony, I am convinced that the members of the Whitman Class of 2011 can teach us all a little something about making a difference in the lives of others . . . because they already have.

One final homework assignment. I ask that each of you think about how you are making a difference in the lives of others. And, if you determine that you are not, please make a decision about how you can make that difference, and start doing it tomorrow morning.

## I am so very proud of you. And I believe Mr. Schulz is very proud of you as well.

I would be remiss if I did not recognize an individual who is also leaving South Huntington as you are this evening. Mr. James Polansky, the principal of Walt Whitman for the past six years, and the Asst. Supt for Personnel and District services will leave South Huntington next week to become the Superintendent of the Huntington Public Schools.

I wish him success in that new position and thank him from the bottom of my heart for all he has done while at Whitman.

Another individual is leaving Whitman with the Class of 2011. He needs to be recognized as well. Please join me in saying farewell to Mr. Steve Ramsey, assistant principal at Whitman, who will be retiring in July. Mr. Ramsey, we thank you for all you have done for South Huntington and Walt Whitman. I know you have made a difference, as Mr. Schulz would have wanted, in the lives of thousands of students who have passed through Whitman while you have been assistant principal.

I leave you with an old Irish proverb.

May you have all the happiness in the world, and just enough sorrow and disappointment to know and appreciate the difference.