

Dr. Rizzo Saunders, Dr. Forrest, parents, guardians, families, and most importantly; the class of 2021...Welcome to the 50th commencement ceremony at ConVal Regional High School.

We are here together to celebrate this special group of seniors. I am honored to speak to my first graduating class at ConVal. When I was thinking of the phrase... *first class*... it truly defined you. The class of 2021 is a *first class* act.

You did not ask to be dropped into the middle of a pandemic. You did not ask for many of the changes that occurred in and outside of school in response to that pandemic. However, you responded with patience, care for others, empathy, and you found ways to persevere ... you responded with a *first-class* demeanor.

More about that word “first.” As you all start on your respective journeys, please remember that you must take care of yourself first before you can take care of others. Always make your mental health a priority and don’t hesitate to reach out to someone for help if you need it.

In your short time at ConVal, you accomplished *many* things; however understand that someone helped you at some point along the way. Remember to show gratitude towards those that assisted you on your journey. Thank a parent, grandparent, guardian, sibling, teacher, coach, counselor... anyone that believed in you and didn’t give up on you.

Then, there's that word “class.” When thinking about YOUR class, the class of 2021 I’m reminded of the author Shel Silverstein.

He said “Listen to the MUSTN’TS, child, Listen to the DON’TS Listen to the SHOULDN’TS The IMPOSSIBLES, the WONT’S Listen to the NEVER HAVES Then listen close to me— Anything can happen, child, ANYTHING can be.”

No matter how many times you hear that something can’t and shouldn’t be done, you have to carve your own path—and be fearless.

In The Giving Tree he spoke about the beauty of giving,

The story is about a boy and a tree who loved him so much, it gave him its apples, even its wood for a house and a boat. Finally, now only a stump, it offered the boy a place to sit and rest.

"I don't need very much now," said the boy, "just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired."

"Well," said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could,

"well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest."

And the boy did.

And the tree was happy."

Some people think it's sad because the tree gave the boy everything it had. But, I think it's a wonderful story of unconditional love. Giving shouldn't be about what you get back.

There is joy in giving, it comes from doing things for other people.

My wish to you is to be as giving as that tree and to listen well.

But, remember to give to yourself, too, and remember to decide for yourself

"Anything can happen, child, ANYTHING can be"

Paul Broadie said that our Character is not defined in the good times, but in the hard times. And the truth is, there will be more hard times in the future. However, please remember you always have the ability to choose how you react to them. Your class has shown strength, determination, and resilience. So in a sense, the challenges of this past year and half were almost a gift in disguise — by overcoming obstacles and succeeding in spite of them, you have already proven your endurance and shown your mettle. My hope is that you remember you can get through

hard times and call upon these skills and lessons you have learned as you move forward. As I've said to you all year long, *we can do hard things*. We can, we are, and we will.

Class of 2021, don't always feel as though you have to color inside the lines. EACH of you were born to stand out. Part of what has made your class so special is that collectively everyone embraced differences, fostered and nurtured an original voice, and at times pushed boundaries in efforts to make things better. Each member of the class of 2021 was unique. *Celebrate* your uniqueness. Be *proud* of it. Release the *real you* to the world. The world needs you.

So wherever you are off to, and wherever you go, remember you have the skills necessary to keep moving forward. You will forever be a ConVal Cougar. I am so honored to have shared a small part of your journey and wish you the very best in all you do. Congratulations to my first class, the class of 2021 ☺