

Good evening fellow graduates, families, and faculty. Thank you all for coming tonight to support us in starting a new chapter of our lives.

To the class of 2021: congratulations, we did it! Moving on from ConVal, one of the most important things to take from our experiences is the individuality we've gained here.

We all started the same way. We grew up in the same area, besides those of you who moved here later, and we shared some important aspects of our childhood. Listening to the Wiggles sing about a big red car, watching Ernie from Sesame Street dance himself to sleep, against the loud protests of Bert of course, and laughing at the Penguins of Madagascar were some of the highlights of my younger days.

As we grew older, some of us started watching Phineas and Ferb on Disney channel, or Spongebob on Nickelodeon. I remember the days when you could always find someone singing Dynamite in the hallways.

By middle school we were figuring out what subjects we enjoy the most, picking extra-curriculars to take up our time, and finding which music we like best. But we still all had the same classes, learned about the same major topics, and equally disliked the strict rules of the hallways. These were the days when you couldn't go anywhere without being in a single-file line.

We entered high school eager to choose our own classes, have a more relaxed dress code, and spend more time with our friends. We used this time to start truly exploring who we are. While we felt more free, we were still following the same core curriculum, eating in the same cafeteria, and waking up before seven o'clock every morning.

When I think of our lives up to this point, I am reminded of Gru from Despicable Me, and the way he picks up his freeze ray and yells “Freeze Ray” just before he shoots it. While Gru doesn’t face any challenges with his war strategy in the first movie, he eventually sees it as his downfall. When he announces his plans to his enemy, they have a pretty easy time figuring out how to obstruct him.

Managing high school has often been like battling Gru. We usually know what’s coming, with the exception of a global pandemic, and most of our choices are predictable and pre-determined. This era is coming to an abrupt end.

We are about to enter a new period in our lives in which we have more control over how we spend our time than ever before. For me, I’m thrilled that I can choose to dance for more than three hours a day. Others of you may be excited to study your favorite subject, or explore a new one; play a sport; devote yourself to a new job; travel the world; or serve our country. When deciding what to do with your newfound control, keep in mind the people who have taken responsibility for you in the past, and remain grateful.

As we leave, we have to choose what knowledge to hold on to, and what to let go of. I don’t plan on doing anything which requires me to have the names of the Chinese dynasties memorized, though some of you who plan to study history in college may need to remember these details.

I do, however, plan to remember the life lessons. In addition to calculus and physics, Mr. Morris taught me to never try painting a house by myself. From Ms. Milne, I not only grew in my understanding of chemistry and biology, but I learned not to procrastinate because you might get appendicitis. I’m still working on applying that one to my life.

It's also crucial to remember the wisdom passed on from our families, whether that means blood relatives or close friends. My mom has taught me that it's okay to ask for help, my dad has taught me the importance of forgiveness, and my step-dad has taught me to never take anything for granted.

Though we have only been alive for 17 or 18 years, there are still things we can gain from our own experiences. I've determined that everything is easier when the motivation behind it is fueled with love and passion. What matters in life isn't what you do, but how and why you do it, and that you do *something*.

It's now our responsibility to deduce what is valuable and significant. This is our time to explore who we've become and who we're going to be, but also to recognize the people who have helped us get here.

Though we've acquired much of the same knowledge so far, the goal is now to apply it in different ways. As Takeda Shingen said, "Knowledge is not power, it is only potential. Applying that knowledge is power. Understanding why and when to apply that knowledge is wisdom!"

There are so many issues facing our world, and our generation has the opportunity to change the course of our collective destiny. Some circumstances are time-sensitive, such as taking care of the Earth. Greta Thunberg has shown us that you don't have to be older than your peers to educate them and create long-lasting change. As quoted from an Indigo Girls song, "We get to be a ripple in the water."

This past year has been monumental in spreading awareness about the injustices that face minorities in our country. We have so much life ahead of us, and we can use it to improve our society,

making a more equitable and caring environment for all. It is now our responsibility to educate ourselves and be the best citizens we can be, whatever that means to you individually.

We are often given a definition of success, whether from society or a prominent figure in our lives. We are given a step-by-step breakdown of what we have to do to achieve success. We are told to get good grades, go to college, pursue a career with a high payout, and make money. It often seems that success can be measured through material goods. But if every person is different, why does everyone have to have the same definition of success?

I don't know exactly what it means for each of you to be successful. That is something for us all to figure out independently. With different dreams and aspirations, we cannot compare our future destinations. As the Avett Brothers so eloquently phrase it, "decide what to be and go be it."

The other day my youngest brother, who is 3, was given a pair of sunglasses by his teachers. They told him that he needs the sunglasses because his future is so bright. He put the sunglasses on, laughed, and said "my future is so hot".

So whatever it is that inspires you, whatever you love, use that as motivation to pursue your individual meaning of success. We can all use what we've learned during our years at ConVal to make a difference in the world. Our futures are very bright, or hot, whichever you prefer, and we are no longer following characters in a Disney movie. We are writing our own stories. I wish you all the best in finding what makes you feel successful and happy, and I hope you do it with passion and love.

Thank you.