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DHS Principal Ellen Dunn to Class of 2017: Overcoming Your Struggles Will Shape You

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Categories : [Education](#)

Tagged as : [Darien High School 2016-2017](#), [Darien High School Graduation 2017](#)[Ellen Dunn](#)

Date : June 17, 2017

Here's the full text, with a small exception, as prepared, of the speech Darien High School Principal Ellen Dunn delivered Friday at the 2017 Commencement:

[The exception was a passage about cell phones, which got a laugh from the audience and a few extra words from Dunn.]

Good evening, Members of the Darien Board of Education, Dr. Dan Brenner, colleagues, parents, grandparents, guests and most distinguished members of the Darien High School Class of 2017.

There is a long standing graduation tradition at DHS of students presenting a small token to the principal as they receive their diplomas. Tonight, I am told, you will each hand me a beautiful paper butterfly.

Change Is Inevitable, So Is Struggle

A butterfly is a perfect symbol for this occasion. Your childhood dreams were carried on the wings of these fragile creatures, and you let your imaginations wonder at their flight.

You squealed with delight when one rested on your finger and somehow, even then, you understood its magic and message of hope. The butterfly appears for a moment and is gone. If we are not careful, we can miss its presence.

As we look upon you tonight, your parents, teachers, and friends, we feel that, like the butterfly, you have only been here for an instant.

You hold a special place in my heart because my daughter is also a member of the class of 2017 at her own high school, and I speak tonight as both principal and parent. Her metamorphosis has paralleled yours.

Looking back, we parents remember when your eyelids fluttered as you slept in our arms and this day was a distant dream. We can still hear you singing from your crib at the first sight of sunrise. We long for the days when we tamed the monsters under your bed and quieted your fears when lightning filled the night sky.

Many times over these 18 years we have wished we could make time stand still. In a way, we have gotten our wish tonight. Our lives may be a frenzy of motion but milestones like this one give us a chance to pause and reflect.

See also:

- [Darien High School's Class of 2017 Graduates, Spirits Undampened](#)
- [Superintendent Dan Brenner's 2017 Graduation Speech: Be Passionate and Curious](#)

Today is a day fraught with contradictions. We want you to listen to us, but you must find your own voice. We want to protect you, but you must be free to make mistakes. We want you to avoid failure yet we know that failure will be your best teacher. We want your heart to be safe from harm yet we want you to know deep and abiding love. We don't want you to suffer the pain of loss but we want you to take risks for what is worth keeping. We want to hold on to you yet, like the butterfly, we know you must spread your wings.

I was a proud biology teacher at Darien High School for 19 years and I can tell you that, biologically speaking, the butterfly undergoes a complete metamorphosis — meaning that it passes through four stages on

its way to flight. These stages are so distinct that they bear no resemblance to the final form.

How to Strengthen Yourself

The fertilized egg begins as one cell with all of the biological content necessary to orchestrate the journey. You also have everything within you that is necessary to navigate your future. Get to know yourself, and be true to who you are. Your inner strength will guide your decisions and be your compass.

The caterpillar emerges and it is designed to consume. It is voracious in its appetite in order to fuel the change ahead. Like the caterpillar, you will need to build your reserves. Be a consumer of knowledge. Surround yourself with good people, and reap the benefit of their wisdom. Take in all that the world has to give, and become the kind of person you admire.

Next, the caterpillar attaches itself to the leaf and is enfolded in the chrysalis for a period of inactivity. Take a lesson from this and find opportunities to be still. Shut off the phone [*laughter from the audience*] — I'm going to say that one again: [*more laughter*] shut off the phone! Turn down the noise [*applause*] and be silent.

Listen to the whispers of your heart, and remember that life is precious. Hold those you love closer, and tell them when you have the chance. Don't waste a moment on hatred, bitterness, worry or regret.

Finally, the butterfly's design is perfected for flight and it struggles to emerge. At its most vulnerable, the struggle forces fluid into the wings giving them shape.

Overcome Challenges to Build Resilience

Your struggles will shape you as well. Overcoming challenges builds resilience that will sustain you. The challenges you face will fuel change and creativity and carve out new directions. With renewed perspective, you will emerge, like the butterfly, stronger than before.

It doesn't take a biology teacher to recognize that you have picked a perfect symbol for your final day at Darien High School. You have metamorphosed into extraordinary young men and women before our eyes.

There has never been a more impressive graduating class, not because of your outstanding accomplishments, but because of your kind hearts, generosity of spirit, and profound gratitude. You are the hope for the future of our world and I am confident in your ability to change it.

When we look upon your butterflies, we will remember you fondly for the impact you have had on this place.

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We have learned so much from you. You have changed us for the better.

Remember as you take flight that this is always your home and that you are loved. Godspeed on the journey.

Mr. Michael Harmon, members of the Darien Board of Education and Dr. Dan Brenner, I am proud to present to you the Class of 2017.

Editor's note: This is the speech as delivered. The biggest change between that and the prepared text was Dunn's comment about shutting off phones. Darienite.com added subheadings and made minor editorial changes.