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Graduation Speeches from DHS Valedictorian Eleanor Chase and Salutatorian James Strong

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Here are the full texts of the speeches by Valedictorian Eleanor Chase and Salutatorian James Strong speeches, as prepared, at Darien High School's Wednesday graduation ceremonies for the Class of 2021:

The speeches were provided by Darien High School. At the bottom of this article, you can watch the full graduation ceremony video from DAF Media.)

Valedictorian Eleanor Chase

The recipe for a high school graduate isn't easy to pull off, but with a lot of time, a lot of love, and an ungodly amount of patience, it can be done. I've assembled a list of ingredients you'll need to make a high school graduate:

? 1 awkward fourteen year old

? 30 teachers

? 10 administrators

? A dedicated maintenance staff

? 2 bus drivers

? a dozen friends, and

? 1 supportive family

Put the 14-year-old in a brick building for four years at approximately 70 degrees: decorate with cap and gown.

Making a high school graduate is often seen as a singular feat of achievement for the graduate. I mean, going from that awkward 14-year-old who can't even tell the difference between the B wing and the F wing, and is too embarrassed to even ask directions until they're completely lost and on the brink of tears, to an almost fully-functional adult? That's pretty impressive if you ask me.

But, between all the congratulations and cords and handshakes of today, I hope we all remember everything else on that ingredient list. To the teachers--you have all taught me so much about the world: how to think, how to write, how to reason, how to analyze, and of course, how to take a derivative.

To the unsung administration--thank you for all of your announcements, friendly reminders, mind-boggling organizational efforts, and all of the backstage work you do in keeping our school running (and helping us get into college).

To our maintenance staff, thank you for all your work in keeping this school clean and running, a Herculean feat given that there are 1400 high schoolers inhabiting the same space.

To our bus drivers, thank you for getting us from location A to location B, rain or shine. We, literally, could not have gotten here without you.

To our friends--in my 720 days of legally required high school, I probably needed a shoulder to cry on in about 700 of them. Thank you for providing that shoulder, and thank you for providing some of the best memories of my life which I will cherish forever.

And finally, to our families: where do I even start? Thank you for cooking, cleaning, driving, nagging, tutoring, funding, worrying, and raising us these last 18 years. I know it was often a thankless job, dealing with a moody teenager, but I would like to provide that thanks on behalf of all of us — we appreciate it.

Salutatorian James Strong

About 28 days ago, my physics teacher Mr. Record gave me a challenge. A challenge to get through my

entire speech without mentioning the word COVID. Well, I just failed in the second sentence, but I think his idea runs much deeper than a simple challenge.

After thinking about it for a while, I realized that it means our entire history together for the past 12+ years is so much more than the test we all experienced this past year.

It means that the culmination of all our memories, our experiences, our growth, our relationships, every time we laughed, cried, smiled can not be summed up by describing how we overcame the challenges we faced in 2020 and 2021. We were only able to overcome what we have based on the foundation of the years that came before.

Starting in kindergarten, everyone is sorted into one of five elementary schools and placed into one class with one teacher and one group of classmates. From those early hot days on the playground to the time that the whole class jumped out of their seats to see the seasons' first snow, we all formed our first set of friends while simultaneously writing the first memorable chapter in our personal stories.

Transitioning into middle school, a huge change happens. In the course of one summer, we went from learning, playing, and spending time with only 20 students, to our middle school teams with 80 peers, quadrupling the pool of people we interact with. And most of these classmates are new, every one with a special and unique history that already accompanies them.

While intimidating at first, gradually we come to know these new people, and the best part is how you become part of that history as well. Finally, it is only in high school when we all come together, 321 students strong. Looking back at it all, you come to realize that the path you have taken along with everyone who guided you is nothing less than an adventure — when five schools become shuffled into four teams that finally coalesce in this one building, special things are bound to happen.

Over the last few weeks, like most of you, I have been away from high school for my senior internship. Working in New York, I have been commuting into the city daily — and it is such a sharply different environment from what I am used to here in Darien. Every day when I walk up from Grand Central to 70th Street, I pass by hundreds of people who come into and out of my field of view in mere seconds.

Sometimes I think to myself “this will be the last time I will ever see that person sitting next to me on the train, that cab driver who nearly cut me off, or that tourist walking down Madison Ave.,” never to learn about the backgrounds and stories that brought them here.

This sensation felt kind of unfulfilling; however, in a way, this made me even more appreciative of how special our DHS community is to me. Every day that we come to school, we learn more about the story of our peers and make new stories with those who surround us.

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So right now, look around at everyone who surrounds you — these are the people that watched you grow up for the past 12 years and no other group of people in this world can say the same. Cherish the memories that you had with them as today we are here to say goodbye to this group.

And while some of our memories from kindergarten or even middle school may already be blurring with time — we can't keep them all — these moments during high school are different. Something I just learned the other day is that neuroscientists have found that the human mind forms the most vivid memories during our high school years, even more so than college.

Take a second to appreciate that what we just witnessed is one of the most impactful times of our lives that will stay ingrained in our memories. This means I can truly say that I will never forget my time with you all.

And I will also never forget all the incredible and dedicated teachers and staff at DHS - you have launched us into our futures and I am so appreciative of that. And of course, the backstage heroes, our parents. Even though you may think that we don't recognize all you have done for us, we do. And we owe it all to you! Thank you mom and dad.

So Mr. Record, while I did not pass your challenge, being a physics teacher you are familiar with the second law of thermodynamics - the fact that time can not be reversed, it travels in one direction: forward.

I will never be able to take back saying the word COVID four minutes ago. I will never be able to restart this speech, I can never revisit this graduation, never re-experience some of the best times of my life so far with my friends, teachers, and family, never can I relive high school.

The ink from our past stories has dried the instant they were written. All I can do now is be grateful for the special moments made possible by all of you and the people who I met along the way. Grateful for the histories we have made together and the stories that I will carry with me for my entire life.

Here's to you all, class of 2021! I can't wait until the day that our paths will cross again! Congratulations everyone!