

Columbus Academy Convocation

October 15, 2020

Address by Head of School Melissa Soderberg

Seniors, it is so good to have you here. All together. Even if we are almost two months late. At the least, it is a little cooler – and you know more about how your fall has started, how your classes are going, how your teams are doing, what activities you can still continue even in this odd time of COVID and so there is the possibility for a bit more reflection on your circumstances of your senior year.

I have spent a fair amount of time over the last month thinking about what I would say to you if I was able to physically get your entire class together this year.

Classically, though, I wrote this just recently – I have trouble procrastinating about the things that matter most to me so just a warning to your future selves... if procrastinating is something you do now, I'm here to tell you it probably is not going to go away.

In fact a lot of things you do now won't go away later in life as you are, in many regards, the basic person you will be (inside) and that is actually what I want to talk with you about.

If you think about yourself as the person you will always be – not that you won't add accomplishments, careers, spouses and partners, possibly children – but your brain and your understanding of yourself are in many ways already scripted into what makes you... you.

What are the ways you can expect to grow?

What shifts as you become adult?

For me, among all the things that have changed most since I was your age are the questions I ask myself... and I hope that this is what changes for you as well.

Let's start with this spring and summer. Since March the world has changed dramatically for you – yes you were home from school, studying online – it has been almost a joke to try to take an ACT or SAT, you couldn't visit colleges – and many people talk about wanting it all to go back to normal.

Then the summer arrived, and suddenly with the killing of Breonna Taylor, Michael Ramos and George Floyd, the world experienced events that had before been seemingly hidden conditions for Black Americans. The depth of fear daily in Black lives was laid bare and has exposed dynamics about this country's unfinished business with race and racism.

In fact so much has changed since March, I wonder now... what does it mean to want to go back to “normal”? And in what ways were things “normal” before?

I wonder if you have you thought about this?

Let’s talk about school for a second...

This May, when I began to think about the kind of money, time and work it would take to safely try to get every single student back on this campus in the midst of a pandemic, it was really daunting.

Some people articulated the issue was a transactional one – people pay to go to this school and the school promises to educate them so we must open as best we can.

For me, how to open the campus actually became a set of questions.

The primary question ran in my head like this, we are the most land-rich and one of the best resourced schools in the state of Ohio... what responsibility do we have, not only to our community but as a leader of schools, to open in the middle of COVID, if we can do it at all?

The mere fact that you are all sitting here today probably gives away the answer I came up with – and with 220 other

dedicated and caring adults in the school, I have spent from May through September trying to make the answer reality.

Questions frame the way you look at the world, they keep you curious and they are at the core of an excellent education.

So this brings me to this morning, and you, the oldest members of our student body, and ways that I hope you begin to think of your last year here.

First among those thoughts in my mind for all of you is this question... You have participated in one of the most well-resourced educations the world can offer. And I don't say this with hyperbole – 36% of Americans have a bachelor's degree – so if you consider the simple fact that this school has 100% of its students go to college, you are already in a rarified group.

Then add our student/teacher ratio, facilities and stability of the faculty and I wonder... what responsibility do you have, if any, to people you meet in your life who have not had access to the same opportunity?

Here's a second question for you that runs along the lines of... so many people (parents, faculty, kitchen staff, maintenance staff, donors from years ago, and on and on) have made this year possible for you – have made literally sitting on this quadrangle possible for you – what do you owe them? And while a thank-you card and a smile are nice, and even important – so much of what we receive that is good in life is a

result of other people (many whom we never see or know) coming together to make it possible for us to get where we are – what is it that you need to do in return?

I have found, and I think you will find as you get older, that many of the things adults do in their lives is either to engage with or to avoid the answers to questions of responsibility like these.

And finally, as seniors – the oldest students in the school – what are the ways you are going to lead the school this year as a class? You have tremendous opportunity – no one has the recipe for how to manage this kind of upheaval in our lives – how are you going to show the younger students and the older faculty the best ways to be members of a community in a pandemic?

Here's what I believe... you all have the spirit and the energy and the know-how to figure it out!

This is a year when you will be fully part of – and begin to outgrow – Columbus Academy. I look forward to the questions you will begin to ask yourselves!

Let's make this a wonderful year.

Thank you.

Address by Student Council President Vaughn Armour

Students, parents and faculty, welcome.

It's a new year, and despite the circumstances, that's something to be celebrated.

Let me say something upfront: Black lives matter.

We're at a point in history where long-held traditions are finally being reevaluated.

People in power are being pressured into admitting that having offensive team names isn't okay and that systematic racism is real and prevalent, whether it affects you personally or not.

That's beautiful and inspiring, but not why we're here today.

We're here because today marks the convocation of the 2020-2021 school year.

A year that will be different, but that I have full confidence in being amazing.

I've talked to people who are viewing this from a glass-half-full perspective and people on the half-empty side. I understand the positions, but I think both miss the point.

Instead of arguing the level of the water, we should take solace in the fact that we pour it ourselves. We control how we'll look at this year, and accordingly, how it'll turn out.

If we go into it with a pessimistic mindset, sure, it won't be great. But if we believe that this year can be incredible, it will be.

And I know that we can make this year anything we want it to be because through my seven years at this school, I've realized we can accomplish anything.

Throughout that time, I've learned a few more things.

I've learned that stepping out of your comfort zone is a necessity.

At certain points, I've been forcibly removed from that zone, but I appreciate the character development from a shy fifth-grader to someone giving a speech to a terrifyingly large group of people.

I've learned that being around ambitious people makes you ambitious. It's not always easy, but as Dr. Yan would always remind me when I complained about her quizzes, it's what you signed up for.

I've learned that compassion is contagious and that making someone smile is the greatest feeling in the world. That you

could be having the worst possible day, and the smallest act of kindness – shoutout Dr. Losambe – can make you feel happy again.

But most importantly, I've learned within these halls lies something very special.

This energy that you feel when you come on campus and nowhere else. It's what makes Ms. Castle have dance parties and inspires Ms. Garita to come to every single sporting event, no matter when or where. It's what causes Javi to hold the door for quite literally everyone, and never stop smiling while doing it.

I like to call this energy the Academy spirit. It can't be covered by a mask, but like COVID-19 it is very much contagious.

The Academy spirit is something unique to us as a community. And nothing can take that away. A virus certainly can't.

So in everything you do this year, remember that. Remember that the Academy spirit lives inside you, and always will.

Each level at Columbus Academy is very different. Because of this, we should focus on different things.

Lower-schoolers, have fun. This is a precious time to learn not only the colors and cursive but also how to treat each other.

You'll make countless memories and great friends, and all you have to do is step out of your comfort zone.

Sixth- and seventh-graders, don't take yourselves too seriously. I know that for me at this age, every new event was breaking news, and it felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders with every decision I made. It wasn't, and I suspect it won't be for you either.

Eighth-graders, enjoy Middle School. Don't feel like you have to rush to become a high-schooler. A lot of my favorite memories came from this year, and I know that's true for a lot of my fellow seniors.

Now, freshmen... high school is very different, I'm not going to lie. You'll have more free time and more choices, and it's up to you to decide what you'll do with them. But it is not as scary as it seems. Rely on the upper-classmen for help because we all went through what you're going through now. High-schoolers are much less cool and much more approachable than you thought they were in middle school, trust me.

Sophomores, this is a fantastic year. You've already had your introduction to high school, so hit the ground running. Challenge yourself, and don't be afraid to make new friends and try things you didn't last year.

And now, juniors. You've definitely heard from upper-classmen that junior year is the hardest year of high school; this

challenging obstacle course that you have to make it through to get to the promised land of senior year. Is that true? Yes and no. It's tough, but if you face it head-on, you'll be fine. Use what you've learned and stay on top of things, and the Class of 2021 is living proof that it'll all be OK.

Now before I get to that class, my class, I want to talk about two very special groups of people... the parents and the faculty.

The parents are really the unsung heroes of Columbus Academy. This place couldn't run without you guys, as you drive many kids to and from school and allow all of us to have this great education. Thank you, and I promise your kid is thankful too, even if they're a middle-schooler and not showing it.

Teachers and coaches, you guys are the backbone of Academy. You put in so much work because you care deeply about us learning inside and outside of the classroom. If I listed off every faculty member that has made a genuinely positive impact on my life, we'd be here far too long. You're the ones that made me a better student, leader and person. I have an immense debt of gratitude to all of you for what you've done for me and all of us, so thank you from the bottom of my heart.

And now, finally, the Class of 2021. Wow, it's really been a wild ride. It's still insane to me that this is the last convocation we'll attend as Columbus Academy students, and that we're the ones with kindergarten buddies. From Eustace Conway to shaking

floors at the Toy Barn, we've always been there for each other and picked each other up when we were down. We've also won state championships, numerous awards and have already left an undeniable mark on this school. And now we're here. We're finally seniors, the top dogs, the kingpins. So let's enjoy it. It only happens once, so let's make our last and best set of incredible memories before we head off to college. I love you guys.

We all have an opportunity here. An opportunity to stare adversity in the face, and to make something of it. Something memorable, something special, something we can be proud of.

And I know we will. Because I poured my glass, and it isn't half-full or half-empty. It's all the way up to the brim.

Thank you.