

Class of 2011 Graduation Speech

By Mariah Chen '11, Head School Prefect

Good afternoon and congratulations to all of you, students and families. Midland is indeed a very special place and her unique experiences connect us all. As I have heard countless times in Chapel, “the people in this room, on this porch, and on these benches, are really the only people who will ever understand what we do.” I found Midland School online and presented it to my parents three years ago. Upon completion my mom tilted her head in confusion, hesitated, and then said, “So there are no locks on doors and everyone has an axe? You mean to tell me there are eighty kids running around with axes on campus?” Yes. No amount of words can do justice to the difficult decision to come to Midland, it is indeed not your average school as you have all witnessed.

One morning this semester, all the seniors sat together, having convinced their teachers they just had to miss class, around two board members. “Would you still have chosen to come to Midland all those years ago if you knew what you know now?” Mr. Babcock and (Paul) O’Leary (?75) ask. We all nod in agreement. But now the more important question is “Would you genuinely recommend and advocate for Midland to a family friend?”

Indeed, hard economic times are upon us. Characterized by the highest unemployment rate in our nation’s history the housing recession of 2008 was

the product of decisions dictated solely by self-interest. The housing market was rising and everyone wanted to make money off of money. People who didn't even have an income were being offered loans, which were then sold from one holder to the next. Prices went up and the truth was buried, the debts were worthless, they were never going to be paid back. Everyone knew it too, the local banks, the investment banks, the credit rating agencies; yet, it was in their self-interest to inflate the system, never mind that someone was going to get stuck with the worthless items.

We observe the boom and bust cycle of free markets and echo Adam Smith's idea of the invisible hand to effectively allocate resources. Free markets are driven by self-interest as Smith observes in *Wealth of Nations*: "It is **not from the benevolence** of the butcher the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest." That does not mean however, that this is a status quo that should be embraced. If we look at the language of Smith's sentence and previous writings, the overstated notion of Smith's avocation for acceptance of a dog-eat-dog world diffuses. Even he saw self-interest in economic transactions as present but troublesome. It would be wrong to characterize those who compromised the position of others for the sake of their own as malevolent but rather their self-interests not aligned with a broader community.

Paul Squibb founded Midland in 1932 to create a school where young men would grow up to become responsible citizens. Nearly eighty years later, in what ways and to what extent has he succeeded?

What I've come to value most about my Midland experience is how being taken out of my comfortable element and living in seemingly archaic ways develops one's sense of self. Seeing can only teach so much; Midland students are asked to do. There is a moment when a student swings an axe for the first time and thinks in near disbelief: *"Wow, I am in control of this axe. This is me. No one is editing my work or making sure I get a certain outcome."* Similarly, when a shower fire is failing to light, and one must learn how to solve the problem by one's own trial and error. Midland gives its students the freedom to respond to circumstances without coddling. In this way Midland students become problem solvers, they become strong, and they learn who they are.

As this sense of self develops, its boundaries are tested. Mr. Cumming's characterizes Midland's community experience as relentless intimacy. For better or worse, no matter where you go, you are never safe from receiving attention. Although the ratio of Midland students to acreage is around 1 to 40, if you've ever been to assembly when a dozen groups are meeting and you have to cross from one side to the other, you would understand that this relentless intimacy applies physically as well. If you were the protagonist in a novel, the Midland community would be your foil. The community here allows you to see yourself.

You act, they respond, you respond. This is why Midland students are leaders. They know who they are and learn to act consistently.

Even more important is that Midland broadens your sense of community and environment. We tend to tout that Midland is supportive; someone is always there for you. Yet I believe the real value lies in knowing that we are needed, knowing you are always there for someone. Everyone asks me 'how is being head prefect?' My answer? I have learned "I will be insignificant in their lives, but at that moment, it will matter."

Midland is constantly trying to improve upon your self-interest being linked to a greater community: beyond your family, people we know, this generation, and perhaps that is what certain bankers or creditors were lacking. Their self-interests were not aligned with the community's self-interest. From learning to care for strangers to developing a relationship with nature, Midland implores you to transcend the community right in front of you and embrace an ever-expanding portion of the world.

So after much thought, I sincerely do believe that Midland is a remarkable place and for the younger siblings and friends out there, come here.

Paul Squibb, I commend you for creating a place where young adults have no choice but to be exposed to the tools of being a responsible citizen: an unlimited idea of community and the strength and consistency to care.

Because how easy it is to be apathetic. The sophomores read *Sophie's World*. An accessible, historical philosophy book in which the philosopher says to his student "I will not allow you, of all people, to join the ranks of the apathetic and indifferent."

Ladies and gentlemen, the lie is that we are all separate. Do not call it quits. David Callahan concludes in his novel *The Cheating Culture*, "In the end, one of the most important changes needed to reduce cheating in many places is to banish the perception that "everybody does it." If you don't cheat, the category of "everybody" will include one less person. And if you set an example, or persuade others not to cheat, than "everybody" comes become "some people" and maybe, in time, "a few people."

Do not experience the pitfall the majority of the world is feeling, which is alienated from themselves, their neighbors, and the world; now more than ever, the world needs more empathy.

Midland Oaks, Shue Him and I discussed for a long time ways in which we could make this graduation ceremony about all of us. You have all done great work this year and it has been a privilege to be amongst the most caring people this generation has to offer. My wish for you all is that these lessons continue to grow in scope so that you too can inspire. My favorite word:

1. To fill (someone) with the urge or ability to do or feel something, esp. to do something creative

2. To breathe and inhale

Breathe in gently and feel the air as it passes through your system. This moment is perfect

We have taken eighty strangers and three thousand acres and made a community. The rest of the world is waiting.