

Speech for PS 226

Good morning members of the faculty and administration, parents, grandparents, and other family members and most especially -- graduates. How happy I am to be back at PS 226, a place that holds such wonderful memories for me.

As I was driving here this morning, I was thinking of my own graduation day many years ago. It wasn't here in the school auditorium, but at the Marlboro Theater on Bay Parkway. You know, PS 226 went up to the eighth grade then, so from here we went directly to high school. It was such an important occasion, I remember. All the girls went to the beauty parlor, some of us for the first time, and we wore dresses we had sewn ourselves. That was a requirement for graduation. In those days, all the girls took sewing, cooking, and housekeeping. And the boys took shop and woodworking. I must tell you I was never a terrific sewer, and I used to sneak my dress home so that my grandmother, who lived with us, could do all the fine stitching.

I was also thinking this morning of the many times I had been on this stage in this auditorium. I once had a pretty voice, and I was in so many of our school shows. Since they didn't let us sing love songs, I used to do "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes" from

Snow White. In the seventh grade, our class put on an operetta called "The Mikado" which takes place in Japan. I'll never forget the big black wig I had to wear.

Another thing I remember about PS226 with much fondness is the After School Center. Almost every day, I would come home from school, throw down my books, have my milk & cookies, change into dungarees (girls couldn't wear pants to school then), and run back to school. In nice weather we played outside, in bad weather we played in the gym. And our favorite sport was soccer --played by both boys and girls.

But enough of my past. The subject today is really your future. This is such an important day in your lives. It's what we call "a marker." It separates one stage of life from another. This stage began when you were little children, maybe 5 or 6 years old, entering kindergarten for the first time. That was the start of your educational life. And now you have completed that part of your education and are about to leave childhood behind and and move on to junior high school and adolescence.

These are going to be years of great changes. You'll be growing up. It will be a very exciting time of life, in many ways the most wonderful time of life. But it won't be an easy one. There will be challenges everywhere, decisions to be made about school, about friends, about all the things

that have to do with growing up. And my best advice to you is to remember all the things you have learned here and at home from your teachers and your parents and other family members to help you make the right decisions as you go along.

When you get to high school, you will probably read a book called A Tale of Two Cities. It was written about 150 years ago by an Englishman named Charles Dickens. It's about the French Revolution which took place more than 200 years ago, and it begins with the line "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Charles Dickens was talking about Paris in 1789, but I think he could just as easily have meant New York in 1993.

Why the worst of times? Well, it seems to me, it's much harder for children like you than it was for us. Life is so much more dangerous. There are problems we didn't have to face when we were kids, or at least they weren't so out in the open. You know what I mean -- problems caused by drugs, the crime, the violence. Young people have a lot more freedom, but sometimes freedom, without knowledge, can get you into trouble. So it's important to be careful, to listen to the good advice of people who care about you and whom you know you can trust.

So that instead of the worst of times, this will be the best of times for you. In many ways, this is the best of

times. There is so much more opportunity for each and every one of you than ever before. Years ago, if you were a girl, if you weren't rich, if you weren't white, certain doors were pretty much closed to you. No matter how good you were, it was very hard to get into certain colleges, to enter certain professions. This is no longer true. If you know what you want to be and find your own best talents, if you work hard, if you stick to your goals -- you can be whatever you want to be. Don't be afraid to dream great dreams. That's the American way.

And there's something else I want to tell you. We all have something special going for us. Because we're from Brooklyn. I just finished writing a book with my husband about Brooklyn, and one of the people we interviewed said, "You come out of Brooklyn with extra energy, extra vitamins. You're ready to take on the world."

I think that's true. Just look at the newest appointment to the United States Supreme Court. Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg grew up right here in Brooklyn. She came from a neighborhood not far from this one and very much like this one, she went to an elementary school very much like PS226. And one day, long ago, she graduated from elementary school just like you are right now.

How many future judges are sitting out in this audience,

I wonder, how many doctors, and teachers, and writers, and pilots and lawyers and scientists and ballplayers, how many kids from Brooklyn who are going to accomplish great things?

One of the people in our book, another boy from Brooklyn, from Bensonhurst actually, went on to become a famous composer. He wrote the music to "Twin Peaks." He said he remembers how his teachers used to encourage him. They gave him confidence. They helped him believe in himself and his talents. "Go for it. Do it," they said to him.

So, boys and girls, I will echo that same advice. Go for it. Do it. ~~And may all your dreams come true.~~

*And let me leave you with a line
from that song I sang so many
years ago on this stage-*

*"Have faith in your dreams
and someday, your rainbow
will come smiling through."*