

Head of School Christopher D. Burner '80 Commencement Speech

I have experienced this school from every angle imaginable: student, faculty, coach, advisor, dormitory resident, administrator, Head of School and soon, just alumnus. I can also relate to the opportunities, joys and occasional struggles every student has gone through here. I guess I thought that all of these perspectives would lead to meaningful lessons for the graduates. I hope I did not kid myself. But, I do hope, and believe, through the collective efforts of all the faculty and staff, you have learned enduring lessons here. They really cannot be summed up in a brief speech. The Reserve experience, as we call it, is a collection of events, traditions, requirements, rigor, failures and growth that occur throughout your time on this beautiful campus. But, I will attempt to express some of them today.

One of the more interesting parts of my experiences at Reserve has been serving as Head of School. My route was somewhat unusual, I came from, as I call it “within” which is not typical in schools. The transition was challenging, and now you probably cannot even imagine my past roles, although Ms. Bonomo and others tried to recreate some of them the other day. It may seem hard to believe now, but I really did not know what to expect in each of these roles. As I became Head of School there were two events at the outset that demonstrated how much my role, and relationship with the community, had changed once I entered this position.

The first occurred when I visited my son, Matt, who attended another boarding school.

As we walked across campus, I asked him,

“Where is the Head of School’s office? I would like to meet him.”

His response –

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know.”

Well, right there I learned the students’ view of the Head of School. I guess the students’ view of the Head of School changed after I was here a while as my daughter, Abi, remained and graduated from Reserve.

The second occurred as I was walking across the Reserve campus with a student who was my advisee and who had been in my Latin class before I became Head of School.

As we were walking, she stopped and looked at me inquisitively, and asked,

“What do you do all day now?”

I responded,

“I simply try to stay busy and stay out of the way.”

So I learned, right away, some students are avoiding me and others simply wonder what I am doing all day.

I also learned I have an unusual, in fact a unique, view on the school and students from this perspective. I can add that I immediately learned that the graduation ceremony was one of the most enjoyable events of my position.

Having the opportunity to see the joy and happiness from this perspective of graduates and their families is truly rewarding.

Another view, is a broad perspective of each senior class. Believe me, there have been some very trying senior classes. As I consider senior classes, this has been a strong and cohesive class and, as I have already told you, I do not say that to every class. You have also been – for the most part – well-behaved. Most importantly, you have grown, you clearly enjoy being around each other, and you have made this a better school. I have had opportunities to sit through, plan, lead and now even speak at graduations.

Graduations are curious events, and many have commented on them.

Recently, David Brooks, a columnist, commented,

“Rituals such as graduation encourage you to be more intentional about your life.”

Perhaps there is some value in this comment, but I would never attribute my intentional outlook to a graduation or even a speech at graduation. Also, many graduation speakers urge students to follow passion, pursue new activities and strike out on new and unknown paths after a graduation. This certainly does not appear intentional to me. And, my guess is you know your next step – and your parents do as well.

My thought about graduation: it is a celebration, a moment to pause with family, friends, and everyone who has made this educational experience possible, perhaps hear some lessons, and move on to your next step. If some sort of education occurs from a short speech, I guess that is all for the better.

But I do want to pause, reflect, and consider the students and your next steps.

First of all, in this moment of steps and moving on, I hope you will consider the growth, value and enduring impact that Reserve has had on you. I recognize there are steps, letters of admission, awards, degrees, graduate schools, new jobs and personal changes ahead of you. These are all certainly important, and Reserve is one of those steps and part of this process. Nonetheless, I also hope you take time to reflect on your experiences at Western Reserve Academy and not consider it simply a step, a notch and a move on to your future successes, but value it, and consider what has occurred right here. It is meaningful and enduring, not simply a step.

I would also like to point out that you have learned in many ways beyond the classroom. I would like to demonstrate how much you have learned from each other, and, we have all learned from you.

I turn to the lessons from your senior speeches. Your speeches demonstrate growth, self-understanding, the value of friends and support, hardships, lessons learned through failure and at times, simply personal awkwardness.

Consider the following comments from your speeches:

“I spent too much time trying to live up to the expectations of my peers when all I needed was to accept myself. Now that I have learned this, I am able to set my goals at where I need them without feeling less.”

Next:

“Over the course of my time here, I found that involving myself at WRA has led to friendships that I do not feel like I could make anywhere else. So value the people that surround you and take advantage of the experiences dear old Reserve has to offer while you can.”

Also:

“You cannot find comfort in a situation of despair, you must go forward and work to be the person you want to be, not the person that you think others want of you, but the person you are meant to turn out as.”

Another, with an informal word I will try to say:

“I will leave Reserve with this as I hope y’all will too. The duality of my essence may be a reflection of my tangled roots, but everything I do and everything that I am comes from myself and this community.”

Another speech commented:

“Have high expectations for life, but also the understanding that it is okay to fail. Stop doubting yourself. Know that you are strong, smart, powerful, determined, and capable of anything you dream of. And most importantly, believe in yourself and love yourself because you are beautiful just the way you are.”

Another, looking back says:

“As cliché as it sounds, always remember who you are and where you came from. With the memories you made before high school as well as the ones you make during, I hope that you will be able to use them formatively in your everyday lives.”

“So, with that in mind, I want to leave you guys more compelled to take risks, more passionate about your dreams, and more determined to become the best versions of yourselves. Make your 10-year-old-self proud!”

Another considers our place among others:

“Do not lose sight of your place in the world as a human being, as an argument, as a collection of experiences. Share them.”

And finally,

“Do not always focus on future steps, and do not worry too much about future options. Do not always take into the account of the opportunity costs. Venture into something new. Choose wisely and wildly. There is immense beauty hidden in the present moment awaiting for your discovery.”

You see, you do not have to look very far to think about how much you have grown and learned. Just look at each other. I am amazed, in awe by these speeches, lessons and comments you are teaching each

other and us – I have grown being around you. It is also remarkable to consider this wisdom came from students who, at one point, lived in Wood House, and third floor Ellsworth. Just visit these dorms, you will see. But, they will grow and develop.

Reflecting on your comments throughout the year, I see so many lessons and it is truly remarkable to think about the students who entered Reserve and the promising students who made these comments.

Having considered your thoughts, I would like to make my own observations as well.

First, with the perspective of meeting scores of WRA alumni in many regions, ages, and careers: I repeatedly hear the same refrain, regardless of their level of their education after Reserve, and most have significant degrees and achievements:

They say:

“Reserve was the most important step in my education.

I learned more at Reserve than at any other college, university, or graduate program.”

I certainly hope and believe you will feel this to be the case as well – time will tell. We have tried to create this experience for each of you.

One reason I believe this is the case is what has led me to remain and enjoy teaching at the secondary level over the years.

I firmly believe, at this stage and age in your development you establish the habits, skills and tools you will rely on for the rest of your education and even much of your career and personal life. Now, at times that might be a bit of a scary proposition. But I would suggest, mixed among the errors, moments of poor judgement, which are inevitable at your stage, you have developed habits, tools, organization and problem-solving skills required for success which will stay with you and guide you for life. I have watched and followed many Reserve alumni over the years from your age, and for the most part, I firmly believe this rings true. I would also add, what a wonderful environment Reserve provides to develop and cement the lifelong skills and habits needed for continued education and life. You are fortunate.

Of course you will build upon them, but the foundation has been firmly established right here.

And, fortunately, your friends, and those around you, had much to do with the creation of these skills.

Next, I must inform you, as much as you believe you have worked very hard at Reserve, and we have heard a lot about this in senior speeches, you have just begun to work.

In fact, through your habits and skills you have learned here, you have learned how to learn and how to work even harder which you will do after Reserve.

Even if you have taken College Level courses here and you follow in similar courses next year, you will find you cover much more material, faster and without nearly as much support from the faculty as you did

here. But you should look forward to these challenges. You are ready. I urge you to embrace the lifelong learning that will and must occur throughout your education and life beyond Western Reserve Academy. If we have done our job well here, we have fired your interest and curiosity for continued learning. As we have all heard and witnessed recently, much of what you will learn has not even been invented or created. The best we can do for you right now is to spark your curiosity and establish those required skills for continuous learning and the inevitable innovation that will occur throughout your life and career.

My next suggestion may appear to be simple, but it is vital in my view. Read! Continuously. Voraciously. It is how you continue to learn. At a time when new technologies, such as coding and the growth of STEM become even more important, and I do not mean in any way to minimize their importance, interest in reading and the resulting skills in writing that follow continue to be vital for continuous learning and future success. As I hear from countless WRA alumni, Reserve does an excellent job in preparing you to read and write well.

During my first year as Head of School, I made a presentation in Seattle, Washington. With over a dozen alumni in the room, I believe eight of them had graduated from MIT. So, playing to the crowd, as the new Head of School, I discussed the importance and development of STEM at Reserve. Soon, the hand of a WRA and MIT graduate from the late 1950s went up, and responded, “Yes, new Head of School, science is important but please remember that it has been my ability to read and write clearly and effectively that has distinguished my career as a scientist, and I learned those skills at Western Reserve Academy.”

You have learned to read and write effectively. I urge you to continue to flex this muscle – read continuously. It will lead to continued learning and even better writing and communication – you will need both.

I know it may be difficult to consider now, as you move on to new surroundings, but remember to give back, in various ways to your communities, those around you, and to Reserve. This class certainly demonstrates this interest. Continue and grow these interests, your talent will help others. The school will need your support – you will have much to offer. And take it from someone who has been here a long time and, you may find this hard to believe, never expected or at times hoped to be here, I have enjoyed it immensely. But, like you, and in a different stage, I prepare to move on, and I am also enriched by my time at Reserve, which has been much longer than your time. I also have grown up in this town and I guess, I feel like I am growing up as I finally leave my childhood hometown.

Nonetheless, I have truly enjoyed every step of the way here. I have taught at two other schools, and I am often asked, “Why did you return to Reserve and what has kept you here?”

Regardless of my age or position at Reserve, my answer has always been consistent – the students.

Reserve always has, does, and will continue to have remarkable, interesting, curious students. In my view, Reserve students bring a willingness to try new things and stretch themselves in ways that are not as evident at other schools where I have taught. For a Latin teacher and wrestling coach, that is important. Who really wants to decline Latin nouns and then put on a singlet and wrestle?



Now, having heard so many of your speeches over the years, I have made mine. And, I conclude, as you have concluded.

This I believe: you are ready for remarkable opportunities and challenges ahead of you. I know it.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you, but most importantly, the opportunity to share the Western Reserve Academy experience with you.