

Adult High School – Valedictorian Speech – June 29, 2017

By Soz Rashid

Principal Bush, faculty members, friends, families, fellow graduates, ladies and gentlemen - today is a day to be thankful and inspired.

I am honored to be standing before you on behalf of the Class of 2017 – to share a few reflections on this, our great day of graduation from Adult High School. We gather to celebrate our success in achieving this milestone - and to celebrate the bright, bold future that awaits us.

I think it's safe to say, ladies and gentlemen, that every graduate who will cross this stage has overcome their own unique set of obstacles to be here. We haven't just survived. We have thrived. We have worked hard to bring out the very best in ourselves - regardless of any difficulties or road blocks along the way. With determination, optimism, patience, and diligence we have each proudly fulfilled our goal of earning a high school diploma – setting the stage for future dreams ahead.

Did we face setbacks? Were there disappointments along the way? Of course. Perhaps more than any other graduates in Ottawa, ladies and gentlemen, students at *our* school – *Adult High School* - know very well that life isn't always easy – and success never comes as a gift.

Many students at AHS come from various parts of the world. Some of us have struggled through language barriers, family separation, culture shock, adapting to the values of our new, and treasured, home. Still others, born and raised in this country, have faced their own hurdles – perhaps juggling work and family obligations with school – to earn that diploma which didn't come in their teenage years. But Adult High School graduates are old enough, and experienced enough, to know that challenges should not be feared or avoided. They should be embraced. As John F. Kennedy once said, “we do these things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.” Our rewards – perseverance, confidence, self-reliance – will serve us a lifetime.

Let me tell you a brief story from my own experience on this point. Recently, I had a conversation with an acquaintance about my future plans now that I am about to graduate high school. I told him of my dream to become a medical doctor. Much to my shock and astonishment, this acquaintance did not offer the kind of encouragement I was used to from teachers and classmates at AHS. He was pessimistic – telling me I was too old – that I will be well into my 30's by the time I am finished my studies, competing against younger candidates for employment. He just did not get what we here know and have learned so well: There is no such thing as a life without adversity – and to *not* do a thing, to simply say “no,” is the easiest and laziest thing in the world. “No” takes you no-where. It certainly doesn't help push personal boundaries or fulfill cherished ambitions.

Indeed - age, fellow graduates, ladies and gentlemen, is a needless barrier. It should never be the sole means by which society measures an individual's worth or potential. Among thinking people, age is a state of mind - not a chronological judgment. Surely, we all know of famous philosophers, scientists, entrepreneurs, and artists who made their mark later in their lives. Our Class of 2017 is not at all different from them.

By its very name, dear friends, Adult High School testifies to the power of second chances, or new beginnings, to the fact that learning should be a life-long journey. We are all adult graduates. Some have their own children already. We can be role models for generations to come. Many people think that education is all about getting a diploma or a degree and entering the workforce to earn as much money as possible. This is narrow-minded. The world benefits

when we embrace learning and self-improvement over the course of our lives – when we use the tools, insights, and strategies that have blossomed within us at Adult High School.

Of course, it hasn't only been hard work which made today possible. Enthusiasm, hope, and help from others have been important also. We had the benefit of friends, classmates, staff, and – perhaps most important – our teachers. I am so pleased to say, on behalf of this year's graduating class, thank you to our marvelous teachers for your commitment, devotion, and support in helping us flourish. You did so much more than educate us. You challenged us, you guided us, you helped many of us adapt to our new lives in Canada, you made us feel worthy of your trust. They say the mark of a great teacher is that his or her students won't necessarily remember all the details of their class in years to come – but they will remember if their teacher modeled enthusiasm, curiosity, and humanity. As unique as the students of Adult High School are, so too are its wonderful teachers. Thank you for your part in this joyful occasion.

In closing, I would like to say to the graduating Class of 2017: keep your determination close and your future closer. Our time at Adult High School has given us everything we need to go out into the world confidently and leave our mark – to make a positive and memorable contribution to our communities, to our society, to humanity. As the old saying goes, the sky is the limit. And this *is* our time.

Thank you very much for listening. Good luck to each and every one of us.

The End