

# Cedar Cliff High School Commencement

## Welcome by Olivia Drodz

Good afternoon and welcome to the commencement ceremony for the Cedar Cliff High School Class of 2023. I ask now that you please silence all cell phones and other electronic devices. *Pictures and videos are allowed, but please just make sure you are getting my good side, thank you.*

Please rise, and gentlemen remove your caps, for the singing of our national anthem, which will be performed by our incredibly talented senior members of the Cedar Cliff Chamber Singers.

*<National Anthem is performed>*

Please be seated while the JROTC color guard leaves the floor.

*<Pause for Color Guard to leave the floor.>*

It is my honor and privilege to welcome each and every one of you to The Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex on this Saturday in June for the 2023 Cedar Cliff High School commencement ceremony. My name is Olivia Drodz, and I am grateful to serve as today's master of ceremonies.

As a class, I believe we can agree that we have endured a very unique high school experience. Victorious, Drake and Josh, and Zoey 101 did not prepare us for the past four years adequately. Instead, high school felt like a dystopian novel that never ended. Through months of online learning, waking up a minute before the Zoom call started, being quarantined in the house with your family for months, missing your friends, and watching the world change on the news, it was isolating. If you haven't realized, this past school year was the first "normal" year for our class. A year with no external interruptions. However, most of the seniors were barely in the building.

As those external forces stole our time together, filling up the plot of our high school story on its own, we still pushed through and came out the other side, united in achievement. In no time at all, we have grown up. I am no longer the loud little girl with a bob haircut doing nonstop cartwheels at recess at Highland. Well, maybe I am still a little loud.

But now we are on our own. We are at the age where all the books, movies, and songs are written about. This is a time of achievement, of adventure, of uncertainty, of mistakes, and of experience. I am not saying it will be easy because it shouldn't be. Your book would be very boring if it were. But we do have an advantage. Throughout these hardships we have endured at a young age, every student sitting in these seats today has learned lessons of magnitude unique to them. No matter where your storyline unfolds, we all have an invisible string connecting each one of us together. This book we've had the honor of writing collaboratively is finished. But it is only the first of many. Spoiler alert: the next one is just as action-packed and thrilling.

So, in 50 years when you are retelling your story, dust off the pages and remember it not with bitterness from time lost, but with accomplishment and perseverance with the time we had. Leaving after 13 years of schooling will be terrifying. Growth and comfort cannot coexist. But, as master lyricist and philosopher, Taylor Swift, wrote, "Breathe in, breathe through, breathe deep, and breathe out." Remember to make mistakes, strive for your ambitions, embrace change, and live fiercely. Congratulations Class of 2023. Thank you.

It is now my pleasure to introduce the district administration seated on the platform:

Dr. Todd Stoltz, Superintendent of Schools

And, would the rest of the cabinet and administrative team of the district please stand to be recognized?

I would also like to recognize the school board seated here on the platform:

Mr. Brian K. Guistwhite - President of the School Board

Additionally, I invite the rest of the West Shore School Board to rise and be recognized.

Thank you all for your presence today and your involvement in this ceremony.

The teachers in attendance here have learned beside us in unpredictable times, yet still supported us diligently so we can celebrate today. I ask that all Cedar Cliff High School teachers present today please stand as we recognize them for their dedication to their students and for creating a community of compassion. Without their devotion in their classrooms, none of this would have been possible. I am sincere when I say thank you.

Our first speaker today will be heading to The George Washington University to study International Relations. You might know her as the only person to smile through any situation, she is sunshine herself. I am pleased to introduce one of my dearest friends, a gorgeous giggle, salutatorian Madeline Graf.

## **Madeline Graf, Salutatorian**

A certain stubborn art teacher recently told me that life is made up of puzzle pieces. And I can't think of a more perfect metaphor for our voyage through K-12 education. In each chapter of our lives we add, take apart, refit, and reform our own personal puzzles. In elementary school we were creating the border, starting with the corner pieces, stringing together golden memories of ice cream with sprinkles, playing jackpot at recess, and the colorful wonder of running under a rainbow parachute in gym class. We were learning our first lessons of friendship and failure.

Middle school had us starting with the real substance of the puzzle, but it was also filled with the most mistakes. It had us forcing pieces into places they simply didn't fit because we didn't understand the full picture yet. Alongside our lessons in math, science, English, and history, we learned who to trust, what things caught our interest, and how to understand our emotions. What our middle schools lacked in air conditioning; they made up for in helping us form the beginnings of who we are today. High school provided an environment for more exploration. New friendships were forged, new puzzle pieces added. Fresh heartbreaks and fresh starts had us discarding pieces that we decided we didn't need. We continued to grow and our pictures finally started to become clearer.

Of course, this path was anything but linear. The pandemic made it feel like our puzzles were double-sided, and we could make neither heads nor tails of the final product. At times, it didn't make any sense until we stood back and looked from afar. But ultimately that experience, and all the other failures and triumphs, meltdowns and successes made our puzzles all the more extraordinary.

No matter what your puzzle looks now, whether its colorful or confused, strategic or sloppy, it stands as a beautiful collage of how far we've come. It is filled with the cornerstones of childhood memories, the pang of our first mistakes, the swirls of long-lasting friendships, the ingrained lessons of our teachers, and all the other thoughts, beliefs and emotions that make us who we are.

Our puzzles, our lives, are far from complete. There are pieces out there that are meant for us that we can't envision right now. There are sections that seem huge to us now that will grow smaller with time. There are a few of us who might start our puzzles over altogether, and some who might find theirs to be 3-dimensional. Ultimately, our puzzles show us the boundless potential we have as we take this final step out of our childhood and into the rest of our lives.

I stand here, in front of you all, in a cap and gown, ready to embark on the next chapter of my life. But inside, I still feel the fifth-grade version of me, ponytailed and wearing pink glasses, thinking that 2023 is an eternity away. This all feels too big, too scary, too soon. But I tell you all, it is this fear, this unwillingness to let go, that proves to me and to all of you that our time here was worthwhile, that our puzzles weren't for nothing. Feeling sad, feeling nostalgic, feeling vulnerable, it all means that our high school experience went exactly as it was supposed to go and it prepared us for adulthood in the best way possible. It allowed us to create memories that will last a lifetime and to form bonds with each other that no distance can break.

I would like to thank all of my teachers and my family for their constant support, even when some of my pieces were lost between couch cushions. And thank you to the classmates who have become friends, and the friends who became family. I am so blessed to have you as pieces in my puzzle.

So congrats, class of 2023. I am so excited to see all of the beautiful puzzles we all create.

This year's valedictorian plans to study Pre-Medicine at Wake Forest University. She likes long walks on the beach, reading classic literature, and singing her heart out. AND she's single. Please allow me to introduce Blythe Kingston Green.

### **Blythe Green, Valedictorian**

As a wise man once said, "When you are nervous in front of a crowd, all you have to do is picture the audience naked." Luckily for you all today, I am not nervous.

My name is Blythe Green and I am the proud Valedictorian of this year's senior class.

Now I have a philosophy that every good speech begins with a story. So, let me set the scene for you. It is second grade, sitting in a classroom. There I am, two feet tall, side part, a huge gap in between my two front teeth. You get the picture. Now that day in school was a very special day. A photographer was there, taking pictures of students holding whiteboards with what they wanted to be when they grew up written on them. So, they would go classroom to classroom fetching students. Here is the catch, they would only take students for pictures if they had a new career dream idea. Meaning, if someone had already said they wanted to be an astronaut, you wouldn't be chosen for the picture. For as long as I can remember, I have always wanted to be a doctor so I raised my hand only to be told that "doctor" had already been chosen. One thing that you need to know about me is I am incredibly competitive and I will not take NO for an answer. Another girl in my class raised her hand and said "I want to be a waitress" She was asked to go get her picture taken. I saw my opportunity. "ME TOO" We ended up taking a picture together, each holding one side of the whiteboard. I was beaming ear to ear. It was such a good day.

While a lot of people who I have talked to in the past few weeks have been thinking back through their time in school, this afternoon I would like to direct your attention in a different direction. Towards the future. I bet that each of you has had a dream for your life at some point. What was it? I want everyone in this room right now to close your eyes. I want you to think of that dream. It could be one that you have had since you were two, one that you gave up over time, or one that is more recent. Just picture it.

You can open your eyes now. The funny thing about dreams is you can accomplish

them, but nobody can do them for you. Thinking that someone will accomplish your dreams for you is a little something I like to call *Magic Thinking*. Now *Magic Thinking* is a truly dangerous foe. Here are some examples, *Magic Thinking* is wanting to be a pro athlete but never making the time to go to the gym. *Magic Thinking* is wanting to make a lot of money but spending all your time in bed scrolling. *Magic Thinking* is wanting to get out of your current situation but never taking the first step. You end up going nowhere. But that doesn't have to be your life.

So if *Magic Thinking* doesn't get you there, let me tell you what actually does. There is one key ingredient that separates those who actually achieve their dreams and those who don't. It's not IQ, SAT, or innate ability. It's one word. Here it is...

"yougottawanna." Ok, some of you will insist that that is three words. God bless you. It is the secret ingredient to success. Call it what you will: grit, chutzpah, drive. Yougottawanna is the one thing that makes a difference.

You have got to want your dream badly enough that you get out of bed early in the morning to take one small step towards it.

You have got to want your dream so much that you are willing to push yourself out of your comfort zone.

You have got to want your dream so badly that you silence your fears and step out courageously.

Yougottawanna more than the person next to you.

Yougottawanna even more than you did yesterday.

Now everyone look at someone around you and say yougottawanna.

The one key ingredient that determines what you will accomplish from this day forward lies in that one word: yougottawanna. Now some of you in this room are thinking, "My dream is so outrageously impossible that I would never be able to get there." I acknowledge that my response is going to sound like a Disney princess movie, but I am going to say it anyway. You can do ANYTHING if you put your mind to it, let me rephrase that. You can do ANYTHING and I say anything if you take active and intentional action toward your dream. Fellow graduates, I am talking about this to you now because you are at a pivotal moment in your life. Until now, you had to go to school. Your schooling was scripted, planned, and government-mandated. But from this point onward, your life is all you baby. No matter whether your history has been good or bad, it does not need to define you. You are crossing a line here. When you walk out of here, high school will be your past and your dreams will define your future.

My dream, ever since I could remember was to be a doctor. I have pursued that dream up till now and I am continuing to pursue that dream as I head off to college.

Now think back to your dream. Do you want to accomplish it or do you WANT it to stay

in the realm of impossible? So what is that key ingredient again? Yougottawanna.

Don't fall prey to *Magic Thinking*. Your future is not in the hands of other people, it is in your hands. So I am going to leave you with this: Your future is ahead of you, what will you do with it?

Thank you, Blythe.

At this point in our ceremony, I call forward Mr. Tyler Gensler, Cedar Cliff assistant principal, and Mrs. Jennifer Crager, senior class guidance counselor, who will recognize those who received Senior Awards this year.

Thank you, Mr. Gensler and Mrs. Crager, and congratulations to all of the award winners.

I now call upon Dr. Kevin Fillgrove, principal of Cedar Cliff High School, for the presentation of the class.

### **Dr. Kevin Fillgrove, Cedar Cliff Principal**

What are you going to do now with the gifts that you have been given?

Like all high school principals in 2023, I consulted a notable expert in the field of speech writing whose works are filled with strong metaphors, elegant analogies, awe inspiring motivational stories and poetic quotes from the best of humanity...ChatGPT.

And then almost immediately in my mind I heard the strong and distinctive, Shakespearian inspired voice of Ms. Bowerman saying "you will not get credit for a speech written by a robot." So...you got me and here we go.

What are you going to do now with the gifts you have been given?

You have incredible gifts to share with the world! Your friends have seen them. Your families have seen them. Your teachers have seen them. And each one of you has a unique collection of gifts that have the potential to make a positive impact. I have seen them in you. To the skeptic, consider this evidence that you have gifts:

I asked you to care about each other and you did  
I asked you to impact our community and you did  
I asked you to help those around you when they need it and you did  
I asked you to lead and you did  
I asked you to compete respectfully and with honor and you did  
I asked you be an example for those who follow you and you did

I asked you to look further and you did  
I asked you to make where you are better and you did  
I asked you to make Cedar Cliff better and you did  
I asked you to be a good son or daughter to volunteer with local organizations  
to serve others to be role models for younger Colts to wear the blue and gold well  
And you did and you did and you did.  
Over and over and over I asked you to do things...sometimes really hard things...and  
you did them.  
Only truly gifted people could have done all of this. That's you! Do you believe me yet  
that you are gifted?

You have:  
The gift of gratitude  
The gift of energy  
The gift of emotion  
The gift of perseverance  
The gift of connection  
The gift of compassion  
The gift of determination  
The gift of friendliness  
The gift of generosity  
The gift of growth  
The gift of grace  
The gift of kindness  
The gift of dependability  
The gift of presence  
The gift of achievement  
The gift of caring  
The gift of forgiveness  
The gift of joy

And each one of you has been listed for one specific gift on the 2023 sign sitting right in  
front of me.

Do you believe me now? You have gifts.  
So, what are you going to do now with the gifts you have been given?  
Let me ask you to do three more things...

First, love what you do.

It's said that between 2 and 4 out of 10 people go to work and get to do what they love  
to do. The rest range between Mmmeh...it pays the bills to constant complaining about  
their job. Please seek out something that you love to do. Your motivation and  
engagement, your well-being and mental health, and your job performance will be far  
greater if you love what you do. In fact, the neurobiology of loving what you do is  
astounding. When you love what you do your brain releases endorphins, serotonin,  
oxytocin, and dopamine. This is the same chemical cocktail that is released when you  
make the deepest connection with another person. Our fullest life is one where our  
loves and work flow in an infinite loop, with the energy of one fueling the other. You've  
felt it. I've seen it in you. Love what you do.

Second, love the people around you. We've had enough hatred. Our differences divide us. But, it doesn't have to be that way. We can be closer. And it starts with us. Please choose to love those around you. They need it and surprisingly you do to. This deeply fulfilling connection increases your empathy and compassion. It gives you purpose and meaning. It provides shared joy and happiness. Loving others has been shown to improve your physical and mental health and can be transformative to your personal growth and self-awareness. It's hard. But I assure you that when you love those around you your life will be rich beyond measure.

Love what you do.  
Love those around you and

Third, give some love to yourself.

If the cabin pressure in your airplane all of a sudden failed...everyone who has ever flown knows what to do...put on your own air mask before you help others with theirs. Your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health are important and you must pay attention to you or you won't be able to love us. Period. Self-love will be a continual journey in your life and will involve developing habits of self-compassion, self-acceptance, and self-care. It's about treating yourself with kindness and respect. When you show yourself some love, your confidence increases, your relationships will be stronger, your productivity will flourish, your stress management will improve and your happiness and life satisfaction expand. Show some love to yourself.

So what are you going to do now with the gifts you have been given?

Love what you do  
Love those around you and  
Love yourself

So Dr. Stoltz and Mr. Guistwhite, I present to you a gift. The gifted class of 2023 knowing with absolute confidence that they will use their giftedness to love what they do, love other people and love themselves and because of that love, our community and our world will be a better place.

I also declare that they have met all the requirements for graduation as outlined by West Shore School District Policy and criterion set forth by the Pennsylvania Department of Education - including required subjects and total credits. They, therefore, are entitled to receive a Cedar Cliff High School diploma from the West Shore School District.

### **Dr. Todd Stoltz, Superintendent**

Welcome Cedar Cliff Class of 2023. Today, we celebrate and applaud your accomplishments and the many reasons you have given us to be West Shore Proud!

With graduation comes excitement, relief, and perhaps ---- even a bit of fear of what comes next. For some of you, the next step is clear, and for others, maybe not so much. No matter what, from this point forward, you're all headed somewhere.



Some of you will be entrepreneurs, researchers, plumbers, carpenters, educators, musicians, writers, caregivers, athletes, coaches, defenders of our nation, emergency responders, people who dedicate their lives to public service, who knows, but the possibilities are endless.

I'm confident you are ready to tackle the next challenge, and regardless of your path going forward, there's always one essential piece of advice I offer to you as graduates, and that is....

#### Set goals

If you don't have a target, you'll never hit it. Find things that you love, that you feel passionate about, that make you happy, and do more of them. It's the passion for what you do that not only feeds your soul but helps you overcome challenges, setbacks, and failures, and gives you hope for a better tomorrow.

Class of 2023, it is abundantly clear that people value living and raising a family in the West Shore community, and everything it has to offer. If you are a West Shore Alumni, would you please stand to be recognized?

Without any further ado, Dr. Fillgrove, it gives me great pleasure as the Superintendent and appointed representative of the Board of School Directors of the West Shore School District to accept the list of graduating seniors for 2023 from Cedar Cliff High School.

I do hereby certify and affirm in the presence of all assembled that each individual has met or exceeded the requirements for graduation set forth by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the West Shore School District, and is ready to receive his or her diploma.

I am pleased to present the graduating class of 2023 to the parents, family, friends, alumni, and community, and offer them our best wishes for happiness and fulfillment as they pursue their future endeavors.

#### **Closing by Olivia Drodz**

After 13 years of education, we are celebrating this milestone together. Would the graduates please rise?

Our educational course at Cedar Cliff High School is now concluded, and to symbolize the completion of our high school careers, the end of a very important step in our lives, and the introduction of a new one, I now ask that all graduates follow my lead as I move my tassel from the right to the left side of my cap.

Congratulations, Class of 2023!

I ask now that the audience please rise and join in the singing of the Alma Mater, led by once again, the senior members of the Cedar Cliff Chamber Singers. Please honor our class by remaining in your seats until all the participants in today's ceremony have

recessed out of the complex.

On behalf of the senior class of 2023, I thank you very much for attending the commencement ceremony. Have a fabulous day!