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Torrington Public Schools

Convocation 2015-16

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The Community and Us

First, thank you to the selection committee for devoting your time to the Teacher of the Year Process, and thanks to the Board of Ed for your dedication to our community.

Irony is defined as the opposite of the expected outcome. It is ironic that I am speaking to you this morning because I used to skip convocation. Years ago, I figured I would just go to my classroom and work instead. I began attending again when Mrs. Gelormino was named Teacher of the Year two years ago, and I was here last year for Mrs. Pollutro's speech, but regretfully I missed out on quite a few guest speakers and teachers who are credits to our community. With this hindsight, I'd like to talk today *about* our role in the community.

Everyone here, as an employee of our school district, or as a city leader, is in a position to make a positive impact this school year, and so is each one of our students.

In his essay on teaching, Torrington student Jacob Janco wrote: "I find education to be one of the most important aspects of life. Everyone deserves enlightenment, for it will be the driving force to bring us forward in technology, to pave the paths that we shall gracefully stride upon later in life. Without teachers, none of this would be possible. The mistakes of yesterday will not occur tomorrow, nor will they ever. Thousands of years of intelligence has been passed down through teaching...."

In your childhood imagination, perhaps you were an astronaut, an emergency worker, a doctor, a dancer. Maybe you were a teacher. The Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that teaching is one of the top ten dream jobs for children. If you have kids, I'll bet they're really proud of what you do. They may think you're a hero.

A couple of winters ago, my friend Bruce and I met our childhood hero, “Rowdy” Roddy Piper, right here on the THS gym floor before a pro wrestling show. We spoke with Mr. Piper about his career, but then he asked us about ourselves. He summarized our response by saying this: “So you’re giving back to your childhood community by teaching its kids. I got a lot of respect for what you do.” Our childhood hero was expressing his genuine respect for us. Don’t forget we are appreciated, and do not forget the many outstanding parents and guardians who have faith in us. Do not dwell idly on the negatives.

And when people say it must be nice to have summers off, just tell them the truth: yes. One of the keys to a happy, successful life, besides summers off, is to surround yourselves with the right people to therefore be the right people--and that is the essence of a great community.

My first community was my family, featuring the hardest working people I know, my parents, along with four unique and talented siblings, as well as role models, such as Nonno Santo, Zia Eva, Aunt Angie and Uncle John, amazing people who crossed an ocean for opportunity. Earlier I mentioned the idea of heroes, but these are my real heroes, starting with my incredible parents.

My community expanded at East School, starting with Mrs. Rodemeyer in kindergarten. I look back and realize how brilliant Mrs. Reichen was at making me feel good about education. I read my first favorite book at East School, *The Baseball Life of Sandy Koufax*, and I still remember how Koufax set an example for his Jewish community by not pitching on a holy day. I remember how at the Torrington Middle School Mrs. Cianciolo created an atmosphere that made every classmate feel like a friend. At Torrington High, I remember how we looked up to people like Mr. Bush and Mrs. Strawson.

In college, Professor Frederick Roden regarded me as the best version of myself. When someone sees you as your best, you start living up to it. Great teachers planted the seeds along the way, and in college I was finally becoming a good student.

“Friends never turn negative on your dreams,” wrote Rhianna Reed, a Torrington student. As a first-year teacher I had that kind of uplifting friendship with my colleagues, teamed with

Mr. Fasciano, Mr. Toth, Mrs. Criss, and Mrs. Arms. I was mentored by Ms. Ann Gensch. Ann and her partner Steve, who passed away, were my next door neighbors growing up, and they have made a tremendous impact on my life. Ann Gensch taught me how to teach.

Now with the Blue Team, Dr. Gretchen Mosca, the teacher most dedicated to her craft, is next door. Eva Kaminski, the most caring, is across the hall. Jason Beckett, a longtime friend and perfect role model for young men, is in the science room. Corrine Jasmin, who feels like a long lost sister, teaches with me. I am surrounded by success in this neighborhood of classrooms.

My colleague Liliana Kendall recently had a serious health issue. When I was nominated for Teacher of the Year, she asked, “Do the kids get to vote?” When I responded no, she followed, “Good. They don’t know what’s good for them.” Thanks, I think. She is in my prayers, and may we keep her in our thoughts.

It is so ironic that I am here today. When I was in eighth grade, I was supposed to receive an award in front of my peers. I was nervous about the attention, so I pretended I was sick and stayed home. That award was for perfect attendance. Call this irony, or karma that I’m in front of you now. I understand now to embrace these moments, if not for myself, then for those who made the moments possible—for my community.

Here, new communities are growing within the city limits and will benefit from open arms. Here, we reach beyond our boundaries too, with the likes of the St. Jude Telethon, championed by Mr. Tim Driscoll and carried on by his family and friends. At the middle school, our neighbors at Ruwet Farm are happy to lend a hand or a tractor for fundraisers. Miss Jill and others from the town library keep the community bond strong by connecting with the school. Parent volunteers lend their time. A positive community works wonders.

In turn, school groups have helped to feed and clothe neighbors, and they have entertained many on stage and on the fields. Future contributions will come if we hold our youth to high academic standards. That is how we show we care. Every student will grow up to be a part of a community, whether ours or another. Their education today is vital.

When my mother reminisces about growing up in Italy, she says, “We didn’t have anything, but we had everything.” That’s a strong community. We can be that. Oftentimes we are that. Public negativity and disenfranchisement are hindrances. Public cooperation and empowerment will lead to a stronger bond and a stronger city.

So I ask each of you, what can you bring to our community table? What are you rich with? I for one do not have the strengths that fellow TMS nominees Jason Lafreniere and Deb Carroll have. Deb’s rapport with children is equal parts expert and natural. Jason is immensely valuable, and his leadership is unmatched, whether on the trip to Washington, D.C., or within the school grounds. Sarah Coolidge at Southwest, Heather Riccini at Vogel Wetmore, Kate Shaggy at Torringford, Jordan Jones at East, Amy Rice at Forbes, and Andrew Marchand at THS could just as surely represent our district with their unique strengths. I am simply here as a reflection of this community.

By surrounding myself with the right people, I have accomplished more than I could on my own. My debate co-founder Tara Minnerly could just as easily be standing here. The creativity and support of coworker Karen Pfeffer has led to successful projects, like Fall Fest. Former students like Alyssa Picard continue to enrich my current students.

The irony of my presence is strong. It is ironic that I am here because one year ago, I almost left the district. I called principal Dr. Buchanan who did not advise me to stay or go. She advised me to keep teaching, either way. I realized then that if either way I am making a difference in some community somewhere, I was glad to do it here.

This is the community where, after being blown out in my first match as the head coach of TMS girls soccer team, I was stopped by a parent, Mrs. Bottari, who assured me that I was supported. This is the community where I played football for THS and remember as a sophomore that the senior captain could bring the sport into perspective with wise words and a sense of joy. Now he is the head coach, Gaetan Rodriguez.

Some of our community’s youth were afforded precious little time to grace us with their presence. Disease took a couple of my classmates. Outside of this school is a plaque

remembering one of my sister's classmates, Liz Deak. I remember my former student Jenny Kim by keeping an article about her. The headline reads, "Everyday is a Blessing." Can we do our parts as educators to carry their flames?

Setbacks happen. Our district has lost great talents this summer to other schools or to budget constraints, like our English department losing the leadership of Ms. Cathy Sosnowski. Custodians, who run the buildings, may be understaffed, and secretaries, who run the people in those buildings, may be overworked, but each one of you is here because a community has faith in you. Your skill, your creativity, your good will are yours to use. We cannot afford excuses, and students deserve our best. Consider a Positivity Pact, as Ms. Staropoli and I will try together.

And think of the amazing alumni, like Judge Patricia Wald ('44), who was a trailblazing federal judge; Eric Ressel ('09), who is an innovator with the Coast Guard; Naveen Selvadurai ('99), a social technology pioneer, and so many others. They came through these doors.

We can command respect from our students but also demonstrate it. "Respecting children can, and will, create a virtuous cycle," wrote Torrington student, David Strager.

We affect the future impression of education, every one of us here today. One of us may be the inspiration for a future teacher, doctor, astronaut, or Broadway star, but one thing is certain: each one of our students will be a member of a community somewhere. We can help to instill skill and good will. We can influence their feelings about school as they consider further education. We can be good or bad memories as they send their own kids off to school someday. Perhaps they will support their children's education wholeheartedly because of people like us.

"It is important to find peace within ourselves.... It is equally important to find peace within our world," wrote Billy Weber, another Torrington student. May you surround yourselves with the right people, and may you be the right people. I wish you peace and happiness in your hearts, in your homes, in your classrooms, and in our community. Stay gold.