

St. Michael Eighth Grade Graduation Speech
By Parishioner, Fred Phelan

May 19, 2018

INTRODUCTION

Thank you Mr. Shulski for that kind introduction.

I am honored to speak with you tonight, especially to those of you in the graduating class of 2018.

Many of you know me, for those who do not, I am originally from Connecticut and after graduating college, I made my way to Omaha, Nebraska.

Melissa and I were married in 2002. The following year we moved to Philadelphia and lived there for 10 years. Fortunately for our family, my career offered us the opportunity to return to Nebraska five years ago and Lincoln has become our home.

However, tonight, I am simply Caroline's dad. I am confident I speak for all the parents in the room when I say, "We could not be more-proud of you all then we are tonight".

I would like to extend our sincere appreciation to our St. Michael's Priests, Administrators, and Teachers for educating and preparing our children for their transition to high school.

I want to also congratulate my fellow parents in the audience for successfully navigating this year with their 14-year-old. Way to go!

And now to the 8th graders, congratulations, you've made it.

I know you have worked very hard to get here ... and tonight we celebrate you.

BODY

Your class theme is "Timeless".

"Timeless" is defined as "having no beginning or end", "eternal" or simply "*not affected by time*" ... which is the definition I would like to focus on tonight.

What are some things we know that are "*not affected by time*"?

Most of you have already begun to develop characteristics that will last you a lifetime... characteristics that make you as a group and as individuals “timeless”.

Gifts have been given to you by God, taught to you by your parents, and reinforced daily during your time here at St. Michael School. Specifically, core values such as Integrity, Service, Excellence and Faith.

At the 8th Grade Award Ceremony this past Friday, we witnessed many of you receive awards exemplifying these attributes. Moving forward, it is crucial to continue to build upon these attributes that make you “timeless” because they *are essential to every form of success*.

As Mr. Shulski mentioned, I have had the privilege to serve in the United States Air Force for 24 years.

The Air Force holds three *Core Values*, which serve as timeless guiding principles and provide a foundation to continue to strive to live a life with fortitude and purpose.

These core values have helped shape the Air Force into the greatest Air Force that the world has ever known.

The three Core Values are... Integrity First... Service Before Self... and Excellence in All We Do.

I would like to briefly highlight some things about each of these, hoping they may serve to guide you and continue to build on the *timeless characteristics* that I have already seen in each of you. And most especially, with the hope that they may serve you as guidelines in high school, college, and even beyond, as they have helped serve me in my life. I trust you will recognize the many similarities between these ideals and those of our of shared Catholic faith.

Integrity First

“Integrity is what you do when no one is watching”. Integrity is the single most important part of character. Your integrity lets others know what you stand for, as well as what you *will not* stand for... as you already know, one is a lot easier than the other.

It is as much a part of your reputation as any of your accomplishments in academics, athletics, or any of your other pursuits.

Integrity is not simply found in a catholic school uniform or a military uniform alone, although they do indeed provide outward symbols of one who has made a visible commitment to live a moral life.

Unlike your uniform, integrity cannot be taken off at the end of the day, nor can it be worn only when the spotlight is on you and the matters at hand are important.

Integrity is adherence to a strong moral code, and consistency of your actions and your words.

Thomas Jefferson once said, “Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself, how you would act were all the world were looking at you... and act accordingly”.

Done with integrity, you will always find yourself on the right path.

Service Before Self

We have all been created by God to serve others. We serve God, family, community and country.

A proper sense of *humility* helps keep our ambitions proportionate, and allows us to see the ways we can be helpful to those in need.

My father always told me when I was a young boy to keep these priorities in their proper place ... God, Country, and Family.

Over a 10-year period, I served in the deserts of Iraq, and the mountains of Afghanistan during my five tours of duty.

I flew 240 combat missions in extremely harsh and challenging environments. I witnessed many things that don't make the evening news and it tested me.

Although I missed my family dearly in those times, I had the *conviction* that God had placed me where I needed to be. My duty was to serve our country during its time of need.

The fact that I was helping fellow soldiers survive the war, while providing care and comfort to the Americans that were wounded or killed in action, made my sacrifice, or “Service Before Self”, an immensely rewarding experience that I carry with me every day.

You too will all be asked to answer the call to service, be it on foreign battlefields, in service to God in religious vocations, school and local organizations, or many various other occupations and endeavors. “Service Before Self” is a *timeless* demand that is placed on and expected of each of us.

I challenge you to rise to the occasion, and trust that the foundation you have been provided here at St. Michael School, will serve you well.

Excellence in all we do

This timeless value challenges you to constantly strive to perform at your best in all that you do.

As you look towards your high school experience, be prepared to study hard, raise your own expectations of yourself, meet your challenges head on, study longer, run faster, dive higher, swim harder, kick farther, perform better, step out of your comfort zone and put your best effort towards your goal every time... don't settle for just good enough. Always strive to strengthen your moral character.

And never underestimate the importance of kindness and compassion. It's not always the big achievements and personal recognitions that are worthy of your best effort. Remember the small-things. There is a lot of honor and power in asking someone “can I help you” or “do you want to come and hang out with us”? If you see someone that is struggling, quietly offer your help.

Say “please” and “thank you” not because someone moved a mountain, but just because it's a nice-thing to say and it screams that you know what it means to live in a kind world and you want to do your part to continue to keep it that way.

If you notice one of your friends in high school hasn't been to Church on Sunday in a while, make the effort to see if they want to hang out, and maybe meet up at a Saturday night Mass and then hang out together afterwards.

Any one of these small offerings by you, could make an impact greater than you could imagine. You never know how much that person may be struggling, and maybe just even your smile can change the course of their day, and maybe even their life. You never know, so why miss the chance?

It just takes a minute to notice, and instead of walking away with your crowd, choose to act, choose to help and in those small daily acts of kindness, each one, makes you excellent.

These values are universal and unchanging. They have stood the test of time. The questions and problems may become more complicated, and difficult to solve. But the answers always come back to the timeless values you already know. You just have to choose to use them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am proud of all of you for completing this milestone tonight.

Despite any of my achievements, I would be seriously tempted to trade places with you. But as a parent, it will be even more rewarding to watch and help you develop these timeless qualities *as you define them tonight*.

As you continue to use them, and continue to learn and have experiences, throughout the next four years and beyond, it will be your integrity, service and commitment to excellence that can make these qualities even more meaningful.

Your future is in front of you. Make it count!

The class of 2018, in recognition of the timeless military tradition that symbolizes mutual respect, I salute you for a job well done.

Congratulations! And may God Bless you.

Yours truly,

Lt Col Fred Phelan

U.S. Air Force Reserves