Lake Heckaman - Valedictorian

When I realized I had to write a speech for tonight, I began to think about high school, what it has meant to me, and what I have gotten out of it. Thinking back, I am an entirely different person from when I first stepped through those doors four years ago.  I have changed in ways I would have never imagined. Most of my classmates have, too..Then it hit me, this change is really what it’s all about. As journalist Gail Sheehy put it, “If we don't change, we don't grow. If we don't grow, we aren't really living.”

Most people think of high school as a place teenagers go to learn what they need to build upon for the rest of their life. This is accurate; I think everyone in the Class of 2013 has learned at least a few things in their years at Penn Manor. However, high school is more than a building where students go to learn; it is a place where they go to change. This change is **intellectual**, as would be expected after four years of classes. It is also **physical,** as four years make some big differences in the way we dress, look, and the activities we choose. There is also a third, less obvious change that is equally vital. This is **social maturity,** or change from within.

1. Change from within begins with a renewed awareness of others.   For myself, I began to see the value of personal relationships. Grades are always the most important part of a high school education, but the personal skills gained through interactions with peers, teachers, and administrators are also invaluable.  Without personal connections and the ability to relate to others, we limit ourselves and what we can become.

It is the memories of social interactions and moments of growth that I will take from high school, the times when I walked into a class and knew absolutely no one, and also the times I felt at home because I was surrounded by friends.  In five or ten years when I think about high school, I won’t remember the classes, papers, or late nights finishing a project. What I will remember are experiences shared with my friends, like socializing in the library during fourth block or going on field trips to the zoo.

2.    Social maturity not only values personal relationships and connections, but it also enables us to look outside ourselves, to look beyond ourselves.

Everyone who is sitting here today, about to walk across this stage and receive their diplomas has finished high school, and is closing the book on an entire period in their lives. Many of us are headed off to college, studying a major that will no doubt change at some point.  In fact, some researchers say we may change careers 7 times throughout our lives.  So for the Class of 2013, the key is not WHAT we will become, but WHO we will become.  Who we are matters –our passions, our causes.  Social maturity demands that we look beyond ourselves to the people and world around us.  To my classmates, I urge you to find something outside yourself, something bigger than yourself.  Invest yourself in something that matters and find your passion, what motivates you to keep on learning and growing.

3.    Social maturity demands excellence.  For the last four years our academic and extracurricular performance has been measured regularly.  Each of us can point to a teacher or coach who refused to accept less than our best, and encouraged us to a higher level of performance.  When we change from within, we are no longer comfortable with mediocrity.   Let the desire for excellence be a hallmark of our lives, so that we not only live with passion, but we live to be better.

The consummate high school cliché is, “I want to change the world.”  I believe our generation will never change the world until we change from within.  We must value others above ourselves.  We must look outside ourselves, beyond ourselves, and live for a cause that is bigger than we are.  If you remember nothing else I said today, hang onto this: Live for others.  Live with passion.  Live with excellence.  Only then can we, just maybe, make an overused cliché a reality.