

Become Who You Really Are

By Christopher Cox

(The following speech was presented at South Lakes High School's graduation ceremonies June 15.)

On behalf of the Class of 2006, I'd like to thank all the parents, friends, family, and educators for all of your support over the years. Thank you.

It is both fair and reasonable to say that I was extremely naive when I entered Langston Hughes Middle School. For my first day, I picked the most colorful pair of shoes I could find, a bright orange t-shirt, and an even brighter smile. Needless to say, I got torn apart. Pre-teen social rules and "codes of cool" were stricter than I had ever imagined and I found myself packing away my personality piece by piece, deep inside of me, until I blended in with the crowd. By eighth grade graduation I was a completely different person, utterly terrified of entering an even larger, foreboding world of stereotypes and strangers.

Upon entering South Lakes I stuck to my routine: Blend in as much as possible; never draw attention to yourself. To me, being in any kind of spotlight was suicide: A chance for others to ridicule and judge me.

Looking back as a senior, my experience at South Lakes greatly contrasts the low standards I set for myself in the ninth grade. At some point between painting the freshman float, joking in Mrs. Rothlisberger's sex education classes, cheering at our basketball games, or singing my first solo in men's choir, I decided life at South Lakes was nothing to fear.

We have been taught by society, the media, history, our peers, and maybe even our parents to condemn, hate and judge. This behavior is learned. When we were children we openly hugged each other. We never hesitated to tell a friend that we loved them. We shared our toys. We drank milk from the same carton (or pouch). We spent hours on the playground playing lava tag. We spent nights under the stars catching fireflies in our sweaty palms. We were all born equal. Curious, Passionate, and Care free.

Suddenly a new awareness slowly crept into our consciousness that this is not how the world works. There's no more time to watch the sunset, or roll down a grassy hill. It's not cool to embrace a friend or tell them how much you care about them. We're told to work ruthlessly, and to only look out for ourselves.

Well, frankly, that's not good enough for me.

I have met too many amazing people, and have made too many outrageous friends, to believe that the "world is out to get me." Call this the idealistic rant of a college-bound student. Yes, I've been fortunate to have supportive parents and great opportunities, but that is not what separates the ordinary from the extraordinary. It takes courage, tenacity and cooperation to achieve your goals. It takes ambition. And if you take a look to the center of the gym you'll find a pretty ambitious crowd.

We have future chemists, biologists, dentists, and doctors. We have lawyers, social workers, entrepreneurs, and maybe even a few politicians. We have writers, directors, producers, professional sport players, and chefs. We have make-up artists, fashion designers, actors, technicians, architects, and engineers. We have at least one ridiculously phenomenal drummer, naval officers, air force pilots, singers, songwriters, and educators.

But what separates us from the hundreds of other graduating seniors, in Fairfax County and beyond?

I came from Sunrise Valley Elementary, and when it came time to "graduate" (from the 6th grade) there was a lot of controversy. In most communities across the country the progression to high school is understood. There aren't many major decisions after 6th grade, but at Sunrise Valley everything was up in the air. There was a large contingency of parents who did not want their kids to go to South Lakes; enough to make the whole crowd of parents question their decision.

There are other schools, private and public.

Parents drive their kids every day to other districts rather than have them ride the bus down the street to South Lakes. My parents asked me if I wanted to explore other options, but I was already scared of leaving elementary school, why would I want to start all over again.

So what's to fear about South Lakes?
Is it our maligned reputation?
Is it our depressing building?
Is it our student diversity?

These questions may never be answered, but I am confident that our parents made the right decision.

There is nothing to fear about South Lakes.

We're turning around our reputation test score by test score. Art show by art show, sporting event by sporting event, performance by performance.

As you might have noticed, our windowless walls are being replaced by brand new ones. We're in the process of a renovation that will make our building every brick as beautiful as any school in the county.

And if it's diversity that scared others away, that's extremely unfortunate, because if I know anything about our school or our country, diversity is the essence and the backbone of both our culture and our strength.

As most all of my friends know, I am a big television fan. And like many of my classmates, one of my favorite shows is MTV's The Real World. Many of us know the premise: Seven strangers are picked to live in a house and have their lives taped. I don't know how this happens, but it seems the "seven strangers" are usually attractive and have a penchant for alcohol. Regardless, the cast-mates are strangers and very often represent different races, religions, and sexual orientations.

Each season viewers are introduced to a new set of 20-somethings, each with their own vibrant personalities. From the first episode we

begin to make judgments about their backgrounds and identities solely based on their appearances.

But in this surreal neon setting, amid shouting matches and tears, you will discover a little more to the Real World than is expected: One's appearance does not represent one's character.

This is a lesson many of our fellow Americans have yet to learn. But I am proud to say it is a lesson that is learned by every student at South Lakes High School.

You cannot graduate from our high school with the same ignorance that is encouraged in other parts of the world. Our high school represents more cultures and religions than any other in our area, and is the reason I am most proud to have been a student at South Lakes.

Our parents could have sent us to Oakton or Herndon, they could have paid tuition and driven us every morning to Paul the Sixth or Flint Hill, but our parents made the decision to send us to South Lakes.

To my parents, and all the parents here this afternoon, thank you.

The great American writer e.e. cummings once said, "It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are."

I have learned more about myself, my peers, the world, and the person I want to become because I am a South Lakes student.

So what we're left with is the class that changed our reputation and began our renovation, the Class of 2006.

In a few months some of us will be packing our belongings for college, applying for a new job, or preparing in some other way for — the next step in our lives. We're likely never to see many of our fellow classmates again, but their impressions will forever remain a part of our personality and our character.

It takes courage to grow up and become who we really are.

Take chances.

Enter every endeavor with the compassion of a child and the sophistication of a South Lakes graduate.

Not only will we become who we are meant to be, but we will also become the change we wish to see in the world.

I love you '06.

Stick a fork in us, we're done.