

Commencement Speech by Austin Wheeler, Valedictorian

May 16, 2010

Thank you for that introduction, Mr. Culley, but I know that deep down the school is ready for me to get out of its hair, so I promise not to make this speech too terribly long. Let me start out by setting the scene. If you remember from the first Pirates of the Caribbean, Captain Jack Sparrow, as he sails his sinking vessel into the harbor, *barely* manages to step from the top of the ship's mast onto the adjacent dock. I think I can safely speak for the Class of 2010 when I say that this is an accurate picture of graduation. With the recent—or for some, not so recent—outbreak of senioritis, this day could not have come soon enough. But before we throw our caps in the air and go our separate ways, I would like to reflect on what it means to have been a part of the Class of 2010. So, in honor of our fifth grade speeches, I decided to start out with a definition. In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, I discovered that St. George's Independent School is defined as...“the Class of 2010.” Why, you ask? Because I believe that the Class of 2010 is quite frankly the best class to ever come through St. George's.

We are the backbone of this school. To make a dorky science comparison, which I am sure Mr. McClain will be proud of, the Class of 2010 is the sugar-phosphate backbone of a DNA double helix. Honestly, St. George's would be *nothing* without us. I'm not quite sure what's going to happen next year when we're off at college because the Class of 2010 is the glue that holds this entire school together. In fact, I always knew that it would rain at graduation because the heavens are weeping to see us leave St. George's. So, to commemorate the awesomeness that is our class—and because I'm a big fan of analogies—I have come up with five things that I think represent the Class of

2010. I've searched high and low for inspiration, racked my brains, but after several days of meditation and reflection—which was a nice change from my usual anxious, stressed-out self—I'm pretty confident I've found five examples that encompass our class.

First, the Class of 2010 is like our good friend Forest Gump. In every situation Forest Gump is placed in, he comes out on top. For example, Forest runs into the middle of a football game, and suddenly Bear Bryant is recruiting him for his incredible speed and talent. He receives a Medal of Honor for saving several of his comrades' lives in Vietnam, and becomes a national champion after unearthing his hidden knack for ping-pong. Along with his first mate "Lieutenant Dan," Forest Gump realizes his dream by establishing the lucrative Bubba Gump Shrimp Company. We too have grown and matured from an unruly bunch of kids into a unified, unstoppable force that—like Forest—can succeed in the face any challenge. The Class of 2010 is definitely tenacious and relentless, and not always in a good way. We refused to park in the right spaces, refused to bring our lunch cards to school (much to Miss Sue's dismay), and refused to put up the video games whenever Mama Smo told us to for the fiftieth time that day.

I cannot think of three words that better embody our class than Jenny's famous line "Run, Forest, run!" Whether it was running from Mr. McCreery's ghost stories at Reelfoot Lake or running from Mr. Densford's dreaded referrals, the Class of 2010 has always been in a mad dash. We never stop leading, never stop studying, never stop playing, never stop talking, never stop living—we truly never stop running. And just as the people sitting beside Forest Gump on the bench scoff at his far-fetched stories, the accomplishments of the Class of 2010 are truly unbelievable.

Second, the Class of 2010 is like Lady Gaga—strange but talented. I mean, what is more bizarre than witnessing Kadarrious Green, dressed in a gorilla costume, chasing and tackling Rob Hyde, yelling and wearing a banana costume, smack dab in the middle of chapel. But regardless of whether you can appreciate Lady Gaga’s peculiarities or not, everyone agrees that her songs are *extremely* catchy. That is how I feel about the Class of 2010: whether you like us or not—and I must say that we are very well liked as a class—you have to admit that we are those catchy songs on the radio that you can’t help but get stuck in your head. Like Lady Gaga, who has taken the music industry by storm, the Class of 2010 has turned St. George’s on its head.

Which brings me to my third analogy. This one took me some time to figure out because I had two very convincing candidates—Michael Phelps and Tim Tebow. After all, one has achieved 14 Olympic gold medals, and the other has won a Heisman, led the Gators to two national championships, and holds unprecedented stats. I was pulling for Phelps in honor of our very own Aquaman, but in the end I chose Tim Tebow. Shocked you, didn’t I? No one thought Austin Wheeler knew anything about football. But as I was saying, I decided to go with Tim Tebow because I not only admire his ability on the field but also his character and integrity off the field. By the same token, the Class of 2010 may have been gifted with a plethora of talents, but we have also been blessed with a big heart. I remember our support and encouragement of our sixth grade allies during the fall pep rally, and how well our class handled losing the spirit banner competition. Despite our disappointment—and I know this may sound cheesy—I felt that we still won. It wasn’t possession of the spirit banner but our attitude that defined our victory that day. And we’ve had other victories as well that rival Mr. Tebow’s list of achievements. The Class of 2010 has 13 Academic All-Stars this year, been a part of every state championship to date, and enabled our theater

department to attend a worldwide thespian conference in Scotland. These are but a few examples of our dominance in every area of the school.

Fourth, if St. George's were a McDonald's cheeseburger, then the Class of 2010 would be the part that tastes the best—the meat. Without that delicious patty, the rest of the burger would just be a pile of bread, cheese, and condiments. The Class of 2010 is that essential component that has you drooling for just *one* satisfying bite. Mrs. Underwood is probably shaking her head right now, since we just watched a video about the unhealthiness of McDonald's, but oh well. That juicy, cooked-to-order beef represents our presence throughout the school: we're the captains of every athletic team, editors of every student publication, presidents of almost every club and organization, executive officers in Student Senate and Peer Leadership Council, and leading roles and contributors in the arts, but unfortunately, there's nobody there to replace us.

And last but not least, the Class of 2010 is like one of Willy Wonka's Everlasting Gobstoppers. Everlasting Gobstoppers will never run out of flavor, and I believe the same can be said for the Class of 2010. The only difference is that unlike Mr. Wonka, who can produce an unending supply of Gobstoppers, there is and always will be only *one* Class of 2010.

I am reminded of SpongeBob SquarePants—not that I would ever watch that show—because Plankton desperately wants to steal the secret recipe for Mr. Krabs's Krabby Patty. The only problem is that there is no recipe that can tell you how to replicate the Class of 2010. There is an undefined, amorphous quality about our class that after 15 years at St. George's, even I cannot pin down. I don't know what it is exactly, but the Class of 2010 is—to put it simply—special. After all, is it mere coincidence that the 50th anniversary of the school happens to be in the year 2010? Is it a

twist of fate that the Memphis campus merged with the Germantown campus for the first time this year? I think not. The Class of 2010 has raised the bar to a level that may never be reached again. We have established new traditions and organizations that will continue to benefit the school, and we have created *everlasting* moments that will never be forgotten. Keep savoring the Everlasting Gobstopper of the Class of 2010, because our flavors will never end.

Now, to take a break from all my bragging and boasting about the class I'm so honored to be a member of, I would like to thank the people who have played such an instrumental role in my experience at St. George's. Thank you, first and foremost, to my Lord and Savior, who has always been my rock and my hope. Thank you to my mom, dad, and two sisters, who have always been my biggest fans. Thank you to all the teachers who have put up with me over the years. For those of you who don't know me, I am a perfectionist. I was the one who cried in kindergarten when I made a mistake because I didn't want to erase my error but get a new sheet of paper and start completely over. From Pre-K through twelfth grade, I have had some of the most encouraging, compassionate, understanding, and amazing teachers, and they have truly shaped who I am today. I would like to say thank you to my coaches, who taught me how to persevere and push my limits as an athlete, not just as a student. Thank you to the Class of 2010 and my junior teachers, who really came together to support me and help me navigate some rough waters last spring.

And on behalf of the Class of 2010, thank you St. George's. I don't think we realize sometimes how lucky we are to attend St. George's Independent School. St. George's is more than just a school—it is one huge family. It's true that the teachers and administrators at St. George's are personally invested in our success, and care about us beyond the classroom. However, the St. George's family extends even further: to the

local community, the city, the state, the nation—even the world. What I respect most about St. George’s is that the school has a mission. And not only do we have a mission, but we are dedicated and committed to following through with that mission. Sure, we receive a phenomenal education here, but we also learn something more—how to be leaders and citizens. I remember one day during advisory when Mr. Taylor spoke with the prefects about a school’s responsibility to communicate citizenship—taking an active part in the effort to better our community. After all, knowledge gained through education is useless unless it is applied in a way that contributes to society. St. George’s understands the integral role of citizenship in our education. At the end of the day, it’s not who has the best grades or who is the best athlete that will be remembered, but who has had the most positive impact in the world. *That* is the legacy that St. George’s teaches us to leave behind.

The great doers, thinkers, and leaders of history did not change the world by hiding under a rock. Mr. Ferguson often talks to the student body about “finding your light.” We must first realize who we are as individuals and discover the gifts that God has given each of us *before* we can go out and utilize those talents to make a difference in the world. And I can say from experience that St. George’s is the perfect place to foster that personal growth and facilitate that self-discovery.

So, as I look out at the eager faces of the Class of 2010, I can say with confidence that we *are* ready to place our stamp on the world. St. George’s has supplied us with all of the tools necessary, now we must pick up our hammer and nails and start building a future—both for ourselves and for the world. I would just like to say again how proud I am of the Class of 2010; I know God has great things in store for us. Now would be the time for me to ask us to keep in touch, but with the advent of Facebook and Skype

and the oh-so-frequent usage of cell phones, I'm not too concerned about communication issues.

Instead, I would like to leave you with a different challenge. A very wise, very perceptive, very mature young girl once said, "Don't let your nightmares crowd your dreams." We, the Class of 2010, have a responsibility to continue that message. Whether you knew Ali Mills personally or heard about her from others, I believe that each member of the Class of 2010 carries a small part of Ali within us. I challenge you to emulate her faith, her fortitude, and her fearless positivity, even in the face of the bleakest news. Ali lived and loved life with all of her heart; I challenge you to do the same. "Don't let your nightmares crowd your dreams"—there is no better advice I can give you. As we transition into college in the coming months, remember that we are living life not only for ourselves, but also for Ali. Appreciate the life that God has blessed you with because it is *so* fragile and *so* fleeting.

Don't allow fear of failure to paralyze you; embrace each opportunity and take those risks, or you will never fulfill your dreams for the future. Ali understood that failure allows us to grow as individuals. Charles Swindoll said, "Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it." Failure is not the end of the world. On one hand, don't succumb to an attitude of complacency, but on the other, don't allow failure to become a stumbling block in your path either. Character is defined by our ability to react to failure by picking ourselves up off the ground and trying again. Whenever you feel beaten down by adversity, look to Ali and remember her courage and determination.

I believe that Ali Mills is an angel—I truly do. God placed her on this earth for a reason, and I think one of those reasons was to forever change the lives of the Class of 2010. I know she is watching over us now and will be watching over us next year as we

settle into our dorms, make new friends, and attend our first college classes. She will always remain in our hearts and minds as an example of who we should all aspire to be—not that any of us will ever live up to her remarkable attitude and spirit.

So, Class of 2010, as we face the unknowns of the future: continue to run like Forest Gump, continue to be original and extraordinary like Lady Gaga, continue to succeed like Tim Tebow, continue to be the meat that makes the burger worth eating, continue to live an Everlasting life, and most importantly, continue Ali's legacy. It has been an incredible experience, being able to watch our class grow and change over these past fifteen years. I will never to forget the memories that we have shared here at St. George's, and I will miss you guys more than you know. Y'all are my *best* friends, and I love you, Class of 2010. Thank you.