

Graduation Speech 2021 – Head Girl Ana Radojicic

Six years ago, a group of chubby-faced kids walked through those gates. They were strangers to each other, naïve, and excited for what was to come. Frumpy looking in oversized uniforms, we stood waiting to find out what form we were in and where to go. I remember thinking that it was scary – we were very small in a very big school, walking the same halls as people who had beards and could drive cars.

But six years have passed, and we sit here now, the graduating class of 2021 - although instead of beards the boys seem to have opted for far more fashionable mullets and moustaches.

First Year was a big year for us. Thrown into the deep end, we had to navigate lockers, timetables, new friends, and subjects, extracurriculars and most importantly, what to wear to the first hockey disco. Everything was new and exciting and there was still so much ahead of us. It's nice to look back now and see how intuitive these things have become for us, how comfortable we've become migrating from class to class, chatting to teachers or finding places to eat our lunch.

As time passed, we began testing the waters a bit more. Things that seemed scary slowly stopped being scary. For example, we realised that teachers were not the terrifying authoritarian figures we thought they were and if you were a few minutes late to class, maybe like poor Eva Copas, you encountered a 'crash on the road' and they wouldn't actually mind that much. Our confidence grew. We kindly began skipping annoying First Years in the line for the junior café, humbled but absolutely sickened when a Third Year would do the same thing to us.

We learned a lot in the classroom too. For example, in English we studied Romeo and Juliet and learned about love – not from the play though, just from watching Mr. Griffin gaze at his Patrick Kavanagh poster.

Third year rolled around, and even our constant bottle-flipping couldn't distract us from what seemed like the be-all end-all of our school careers. Although, looking back I don't remember the stress, or the nights spent studying. I look back and remember sunny days and walks to the shop in between exams. I remember opening exam papers and making faces at each other from across the room, either ecstatic that that we could weave the phrase "Go tobann, thit an carr mé" into our Irish aistes, or if you're like Leah, distraught that a question on rivers had in fact made its grand appearance on the geography paper.

For me, the first three years of school were about finding my feet. The best analogy I can think of is climbing onto a bus and looking for a seat. You're standing and you're looking around when suddenly the bus starts, and you're left flailing about trying to catch your balance. The first three years were a bit like that – everything was new and different to what we had known. We were trying to find our place amongst friends while also trying to keep on top of our new workload. It was a bit chaotic but come the end of Third Year we were content in that we'd found our seat – we knew our way around the school, we were comfortable talking to teachers and we'd found a group of friends. And in the corniest way possible, once we'd found our seat on the bus, we could relax and enjoy the ride that was to come.

The next stop on our metaphorical bus ride was a year of fun and incredible experiences. TY gave us the opportunity to try things we never would have otherwise – Fashion Shows, Dramas, Enterprise, Junk Kouture, Green Schools, BIMUN, the Uganda trip, and that's just to name a few. We had so much to choose from. It's one area where I really can't speak on behalf of everyone because we all had such different experiences. It was a year of making new friends and stepping out of our comfort zones – whether that was standing up in front of 200 people and delivering a speech, jumping off the side of a cliff in Achill or even just raising your hand in class, it was a big step forward.

We learned a plethora of new skills, but also some life lessons. Our TY drama taught me that no matter how much you prepare for something, things rarely go to plan – like how our leading man Jack Ryan showed up on opening night with the most unique haircut any of us had ever seen. On the ski trip, we didn't just learn how to go from pizza to parallel, we learned that adults make mistakes too - like how poor Mr. Sadleir put 60 of us on the wrong bus. We spent the better half of an hour circling the mountain, trying to avoid the smell of some poor kid's vomit – it was awful, but also really funny. Looking back, we have so many things to laugh about and that's because things didn't always go to plan – plans can be boring. TY taught us that fun is important. Things will always go wrong but you learn from it, you laugh about it and you move on.

Fifth year hit like a ton of bricks. TY was that rollercoaster feeling in the pit of your stomach as you hit the top of a hill, and then Fifth year was the moment the bus splats back onto solid ground and you hit the back of your head off the seat. After retraining ourselves to count past ten, we put our heads down (tried to at least) and began working. I don't know when it happened, maybe sometime towards the end of Fifth year, but we began talking about real things; things like college courses and jobs and driving tests – only it wasn't hypothetical anymore. It was time for the big decisions, decisions that mattered. It was around the time that acronyms like CAO, UCAS, EUNICAS and HPAT began to make sense to us that trips to the guidance counsellor became far more frequent.

Unfortunately, it was around this pivotal time in our lives that COVID hit. It would be wrong of me not to acknowledge that the past year and half has been anything but ideal. We didn't get to spend the time together that we should have, and I think we're allowed to take a moment or two to mourn our social lives - the impromptu disco we had the opening night of our TY Drama remains, in my 18 years, the closest thing I've experienced to a night out. There's no doubt that online learning was rough, but through the doom and gloom of it all it was the little things that kept us going. Little things like making pancakes with Mr Duffy while ABBA played in the background, or proudly watching Mr. Sadleir go from a self-proclaimed 'techno-tard' to a tech-savvy Teams expert. So, I'd like to extend a big, big thank you to our teachers, even the slightest efforts you made to ease our stress these past two years have meant a lot - it's not been an easy task keeping a group of teenagers motivated during a global pandemic.

They say it's the people that make a place and I thoroughly believe that. Villiers is made up of so many incredible people - both staff and students alike. It's not many schools that you walk into a physics lab only to find your teacher absolutely shredding an electric guitar while some random boys are lifting weights, or that you walk into your Leaving Cert English class to find Gemma Collins on the screen saying her hair is 'frazzled'. But it is Villiers. And of course, that's not to say we don't work – we most definitely do, even on Saturdays! In all seriousness though, it has been eat, sleep, study for most of us the past few months and I'm not taking that lightly. But it has never been about just academics in Villiers and that's something I've always valued and appreciated. You can go to school anywhere and learn what you need to know to sit your exams, but there's not many schools that teach empathy, respect and acceptance the way Villiers does and that's something to be proud of.

However, this teaching doesn't come from just teachers. There's a whole cohort of staff working behind-the-scenes to make our experience here so nice and on behalf of our year, I'd like to thank you all. To Val, Gordon and the kitchen staff for keeping us well-fed and well-mannered. To the cleaning staff, who are tasked with the not-so-easy job of cleaning up after 600 teenagers. To the night staff, who ensured that Villiers was not just a school, but also a home to some of us. Thank you to Dmitri and to Damien and his right-hand man Louis, not just for keeping our grounds in tip-top shape but also for keeping our spirits high with their unmatched bromance. Thank you to Michelle, Esther, Susan, Ian and the school nurses Bev and Barbara who look after us every day.

Finally, to Ms. Storey and Ms. Quinn – the school wouldn't be what it is without you and we thank you for that. You've always taken the time to listen to us and make us feel valued and appreciated.

We're a family here at Villiers, and as much as we like to joke about the corniness of it all, I think that when it comes down to it, we'd all agree that it's true. It doesn't matter whether you've walked the halls of Villiers for just one year or twenty, you've made your mark. I think that the Louis's, both Duffy and the pug, are perfect examples of this.

Now's a fitting occasion as any to revert back to my first-year self and quote Back to the Future – "Your future is what you make it, so make it a good one". Amongst you are future doctors, lawyers, politicians, scientists, astronauts – and that's just Daniel Farushev. Hopefully, we've made a good enough impression that he'll hire us when he takes over the world. Maybe some of you will dip your toes into the foot modelling business, if your name starts with 'D' and ends with 'avid'. I know for sure there are future sport stars here – future hockey legends like Eimear Flanagan, Ciara Gibbs and of course Aidan Larkin who's still patiently waiting on his sports tie.

Looking at the bigger picture, six years doesn't seem like a monumental amount of time– but that's when you measure it in minutes and hours. When you look at how much we've changed and how much we've experienced – it is a lot. I can't speak for everyone of course, but I have really enjoyed my time here and that's entirely thanks to the people sitting in front of me. I got to spend six years of my life at Villiers, growing up and learning from my teachers and my peers and I'm leaving a better person because of it – so thank you!

Our time here has come to an end and it is, admittedly, terrifying, but it's also exciting! So yes, today is a day to honour and remember our days in Villiers, but it is also a day to toast to our futures. There are so many things to look forward to and I wish everyone the absolute best in whatever they decide to do.

To summarise my experience here in the simplest way possible - It's been a good time. And here's to a good summer!

Thank you for listening!