

Head Girl Graduation Speech – Alex Connole

It is with a great honour that I welcome you all here today as we come together to celebrate and acknowledge the graduating class of 2022. (I have to say it has a nice ring to it) As I stand in front of you, for the last time, I think about all the assemblies we have had in here and how we have worked our way from sitting on the floor trying not to get a dead leg, to getting the VIP experience of sitting on a chair. In fact, we didn't get to experience this, thanks to Covid. Today is one of those 'look mum and dad I have made it moments.' For many of us this journey from 1st – 6th year has been like the sea on a calm day – steady with the odd wave that shocks you every now and then. For others this may not be the case but what I want every single person in this room to know is to look how far we have come and how proud each one of you should be. 6 years is a long time to be doing the same thing each day but as we come to learn those 6 years go by in no time. Every great story has a beginning, middle and end. Unfortunately, I can't go through every chapter in our book in-depth but what I will do is give you a good synopsis of each one.

In September 2016, most of us began our Villiers journey, we walked through the front gates with bags bigger than our backs and grins on our faces to hide our nerves. Still despite our nerves we soon found out it was much worse if you walked into Ms Gowing's class late. I spent my first few months in school being asked 'you are Hayley's sister aren't you.' The first few months of school were tough. I myself went from being a big fish in a little pond to the complete opposite and this was a shock to the system. We were thrown in the deep end literally. We were given lockers right under the 6th years. It is still crazy to me that we are now 6th years. Back then you would feel mortified if you got in their way or bumped into them. We were lucky enough to have our own corridor of lockers over the last 2 years. Thanks to Covid.

With first year brought many new experiences: of discos with one in our very own school. The 'breaking free remix' from High School Musical echoed throughout this very hall. The first of many throughout our junior years. First year also brought many new experiences for students. Many of us picked up a hockey stick for the first time, joined the rugby team and took up new subjects. Some students took a huge step in life and began boarding opening their eyes to a whole different world without their parents. By the end of the first year most of us were able to navigate our way through the school finally. There are still some of us today who like to get lost along the way to some of our classes.

The next two years were spent preparing ourselves to be able to sit in an exam centre for 2 weeks during always the hottest time of the year in Ireland. How ironic. We spent our days acting out Romeo and Juliet, building castles for our history teachers, learning how to read OS maps and we did a bit of schoolwork every now and then! We started to build relationships with teachers and strengthen those with the friends we had made. As June 2019 quickly approached, we prepared as much as we could. Days of stressing trying to figure out how we were going to fit our 'timpiste bothair' essay in some way shape or form into our exam. Despite all the stressing when the time had arrived, it was one of the most enjoyable 2 weeks you could have (in hindsight). It turned out to be a very relaxed but also a worthwhile experience for us all.

Looking back, these precious 3 years were about grounding ourselves as students creating a solid foundation for what was to come. As Gordon B Hinckley once said, 'you can't build a great building on a weak foundation'.

Then along came TY. A group of us began the year in the hockey capital of the world. We spent the week carb-loading eating bread rolls for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We played some hockey too. The bus rides were filled with 'The Spins by Mac Miller as we spent the week in the hockey capital of the world. With TY came some brand-new faces both students and teachers. It also brought Tuesday morning briefings where every now and then Mr Mc Crohan liked to tell us how many days there were till, we sat our leaving cert. (Who's laughing now.) TY again brought new experiences. It took us out of our comfort zone. We mixed with new people, we became models, actors, creators, musicians, snowboarders, skiers. But crucially we found our strengths - what we enjoy most. We saw sides to people we never knew before. Mike Storey's class turned into a time for the girls talk about their boy problems. 'Hats off to you for that.'

Most importantly TY brought a sense of a new beginning. A time to reset, find our feet and prepare us for a new chapter. TY is the year of trial and error to see what works best for each student. It brought a sense of ownership to each student here and gave each one of us a purpose to move forward with.

TY brought many life lessons. For Emma it was making sure she knew how to stop herself so she wouldn't run over another child on the ski trip. It was on this trip that we experienced Covid for the first time and in March 2020 our lives changed dramatically. We were told to stay at home, we were told to only move within a certain area and only essential services were open. It didn't feel real at the time. As a global pandemic swept across the globe, life was put on pause for a while. Virtual became a reality and we all had to take a step back from our busy lives. To our dismay Covid brought a sombre end to our year. The infamous Achill trip had to be cancelled and we finished off the year on Microsoft Teams. We enjoyed a summer of staycations, zoom quizzes became a weekly occurrence and masks became a fashion accessory. Life as we knew it had changed drastically.

Before we knew it, we were in 5th year. The 2-year marathon had begun. We were welcomed back with social distancing, staggered lunch times and zoned classrooms. School felt quite strange, but we knew we had to get on with it. The workload began to build and before we had anytime to breathe, we were hit with another lockdown. Teams became our best friend once again. We all remember getting a feeling of panic checking if you were on mute – Genni. The awkward silence between hello's ringed through our screens. Mr White tried to muffle these with the odd dad joke every now and then. It was a relief to get back into the classroom when we could. I would like to say a huge thank you to everybody in Villiers for their monumental work throughout these difficult periods of online school. Each person made such a huge contribution, and we were able to carry each other through such a horrendous time. The Villiers Family prevailed once again. Once back in the classroom we got straight back to chomping our way through the work and then the summer fell upon us once again. We had done a half marathon and we were getting closer to our goals.

Which brings us on to our final chapter. The most fulfilling but also gratifying end to our story. We began this year like every other a little bit anxious to come back leaving our summer behind. We were met with CAO talks and what's the next step as we move forward in our lives. It all became quite surreal as our time in Villiers started to become memories. As Evie always said 'let's make some memories. That's certainly what we did. Genni killing Mr Griffin is one to remember. (Mr Griffin the goldfish that is.) Our monthly cafe visit with Ms Murray Dillon was always something to look forward to. The evenings in 'Derga Voe' will truly be missed.

The senior girls and senior boys' hockey teams were able to bring cups home unfortunately the same can't be said for the rugby.

As I am on the subject of hockey, I would like to mention someone who has been there since day one of our hockey journey in Villiers – Aamir Khan. I would just like to say thank you from each one of us girls for the time and effort you have put in, both on and off the pitch over the last 6 years. It has been a pleasure and we will never forget the times we had.

We also have some hockey royalty among us. Make sure you keep an eye out for names like Tiarnan Gaffney, Bryan Smyth, Christian Oggel and of course Tory Byrne.

As we finish writing the last few pages of this closing chapter, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge those who were with us along the way. Thank you to our parents and guardians. Even though you may not think this is true, we are truly grateful for the love and support you provide us every single day. We would be lost without ye. Thank you to the teachers and our form tutors, it's not easy what you do but we really appreciate the time and energy each one of you puts in allowing us to fulfil our academic journeys. Thank you for believing in us and seeing the best in all of us not matter how hard we pushed you over the edge. Special mention to Ms Rea who put up with 6P and our wonderful attendance to form tutor in the morning for the last 2 years. Thank you to Val and Gordon who allowed us to never go hungry. Thank you for your patience and for teaching some of us what manners are. Special thanks to Gordon for being the Daily Villiers Telegraph. Thank you to all the non – teaching staff, our boarding staff, the SNA's, our nurses as well as Mike and the team in the kitchen who work their socks off, many of which we don't get to fully appreciate what goes into keeping the school going day-to-day but also thank you for caring for us students. Thank you to George Blackwell and Mike Sutton for their work on and off the hockey pitch. Thank you to the Board of Management and Board of Governors.

Special shoutout to Esther for all our rants in her office. They kept me sane throughout my final years.

Behind every great team there are leaders to carry them through. Our leaders are Ms Storey and Ms Quinn. Thank you for everything that you have done for us over the last 6 years. Thank you for your guidance, attention, and effort you put in. But most importantly your support and awareness for your students. It is this support that immerses us in the Villiers family. A family that has been so good to me over my 6 years. I will be forever grateful for the journey this school has brought me on.

So, what have we learnt over the last 6 years. Well, I would have to say don't get too close to Emma and Genni you never know what could happen. The boys give the girls a run for their money when it comes to high maintenance, and Villiers wouldn't be Villiers without Louis being Damien and Emilia's shadow.

It's now time for us to say our goodbyes and finish our story. It's time to begin another and move on to a completely new and nerve - racking time in our lives. Let's create more memories to cherish. Here's to the Graduating Class of 2022!!!! It has been my pleasure for sharing our story today.

Thank you so much for listening.

May 2022

