



# HEATHWOOD HALL

COMMENCEMENT REMARKS FROM GUEST SPEAKER J. MICHELLE CHILDS  
U.S. District Judge & Nominee for the U.S. Court of Appeals D.C. Circuit

## INTRODUCTION

Good morning! It is quite an honor to be with you all today to celebrate the achievements of Heathwood Hall Episcopal School's graduating class of 2022. What a glorious day! Thank you, Head of School Mr. Hinchey, for your generous introduction and for inviting me to speak at these commencement exercises. I am so delighted to have this invitation to recognize the culmination of blessings resulting from the graduates' hard work, dedication, perseverance, and, most importantly, your faith.

## HEATHWOOD HALL EXPERIENCE

As I begin my remarks, I want to express my gratitude to the administration, faculty, staff, and Board of Trustees for the truly fine education bestowed upon the students at Heathwood. Before enrolling my daughter, Juliana, at Heathwood, I really did my research on the school. And, while I knew Heathwood offered a quality product, I put the school through the same rigor as I do lawyers presenting oral arguments before me in court to ensure I was making a thoughtful and well-reasoned decision. Just ask Board Chair Freeman Belser or Board Secretary Kirby Shealy, both attorneys, about my thorough courtroom interrogation techniques. Of course, these fine lawyers are always up to the task.

Well, in conducting my due diligence, I visited the school, had several meetings with the admissions staff, teachers, and the college advisor. And one day on a long ride to Charleston, I called Mr. Hinchey, who was then Head of the High School. We discussed the college readiness of the high school students, the international baccalaureate program, and the service-learning opportunities. I was also interested in the strength of the writing program and the ability for students to express themselves orally. We had a robust conversation for about thirty minutes, and at the end of the conversation, Mr. Hinchey asked what school my daughter was transferring from. I thanked him for helping me make this very crucial decision about my daughter's pre-college education and then informed him that she would be coming into the kindergarten class. Of course, we both laughed. But, I later learned this conversation inspired the school to incorporate these considerations into their recruitment program. Some of you may recall a billboard from some time ago on Garners Ferry Road depicting photos of Heathwood's beautiful early learners and the statement below reading, "You may not be thinking about college at this age, but we are." Well, I take credit for that as the Michelle Childs billboard.

I tell you about this experience because I have always cherished this school and its gracious community of thoughtful leaders and service-oriented individuals making deliberate and faith-based decisions. Heathwood is not a private school at the end of a long road behind a locked gate meant to keep others out, but an enriching, experiential environment harvesting goals of diversity and inclusiveness, and respect for individual differences, experiences, and perspectives. These objectives add to the fabric of conscientious choices and actions that will emerge as these graduating students seek out opportunities and achievements aimed at positively impacting their new communities.

So, as we celebrate each of you today, we also celebrate your families, teachers, mentors, and friends who nurtured you along the way, provided you the autonomy to become independent and critical thinkers, and guided your passion for learning and leadership. I have no doubt that these graduates are prepared to meet their life's challenges with confidence and grace.

#### **BEING PREPARED FOR THE UNEXPECTED**

But let's talk about the unexpected. As many of you may have heard or seen, I was one of three persons under consideration to serve as an Associate Justice for the United States Supreme Court. Even with hard work and diligence in charting your course, there are some opportunities that you may not have imagined in your path to success. I began my career in private practice and was determined to become a partner at a large law firm. I successfully achieved that goal, and within six months, I received a call from the Governor's office to serve as deputy director of a state agency, and another call, two years later from the same governor to serve as a workers' compensation commissioner. I assumed I would eventually return to practicing law, but then I received another call, this time to consider becoming a state trial judge, which I did, then another call to serve as a federal trial judge, and suddenly, with enduring support from others with higher expectations for me than I had for myself at the time, my career was unfolding nicely before my eyes.

Through these opportunities, I realized there were common threads woven into the road to success: 1) Answer the phone and return calls promptly, particularly to governors, state legislators, Congress members, and, of course, the staff of the President of the United States; 2) work hard and continue to learn while you zealously represent the interests of your agency, organization, or client, but in such a way that even those on the opposing side will speak favorably of you; 3) be mindful of your environment so that you may flourish and remain passionate about your work; 4) nourish your relationships and cultivate others in appreciation for your success – after all, no one has achieved success alone. Indeed, you are all the beneficiaries of the wisdom, legacies, and experiences of your parents and families, mentors and sponsors, teachers and friends; and 5) while there are many more lessons I could pass on to you, I emphasize that you must let your faith guide you. Consider how the unexpected can lead to

dreams you could not have imagined possible. As Associate Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor once said in a commencement speech, "[A]im high, but be aware that even before you have reached your ultimate professional destination, if you always strive for excellence, you can and should have a substantial impact on the world in which you live."

Each of these unexpected opportunities helped to prepare me for the challenges resulting in consideration for the United States Supreme Court. I was also guided by Proverbs 3, Verses 5 and 6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." I looked to God to lead me to the roles in which he thought I could best serve, even when they required greater preparation, accompanied by intense public scrutiny.

Although I had been a lawyer and judge for over thirty years, the decisions I made as far back as age eighteen mattered to the FBI and other investigating agencies. My upbringing, education, the organizations I associated with or belonged to, the people with whom I spent time, my personal philosophy about life and liberty were all relevant during this process. And while this incredibly exhilarating, and simultaneously invasive and exhausting process was happening, I was still fulfilling my ongoing duties as a federal trial judge. I would study at night and on weekends for hundreds of collective hours to prepare for a potentially dramatic confirmation hearing, and continuously locate more requested documents, including high school yearbooks and social media profiles. Ah, graduating students, I hope I got your attention!!! Yes, your reputation begins now. Even if you think no one is watching or that your information is private, keep in mind the cloud is infinite. My point here is not to make you fearful of expressing yourself or associating with people and institutions, but to make you aware that your professional reputation is impacted by the data collected in the cloud forever and it is you that has control over the material that is shared. I advise you to make thoughtful choices in this regard, as your future holds so many opportunities.

And you are also familiar with the unexpected. The coronavirus pandemic required your class to persevere through many unexpected challenges. You have learned flexibility through breaks in the continuity of your routines, coped with grief over missing important life events, and braved the loss of your sense of security and safety. There is good news. These challenges have trained you to prevail over adversity. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, being able to accept and adapt to uncertainty is linked to developing a more resilient approach to life.

And stay the course!!! Yesterday, I was voted favorably out of the Senate Judiciary Committee and am prayerful that I will soon be confirmed by the full Senate to the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, referred to as the second highest court in the nation.

## LIVING THE MEANINGFUL LIFE

When I graduated from high school, I was determined to find my place in the world. Since then, I have learned the invaluable lesson that life is defined by how meaningfully you live it. As Maya Angelou said, “living is not the same thing as making a life.” My belief is that a meaningful life is one that is inspired by purpose, not just promotions; one that is committed to service, not just success; one that is motivated by authenticity, not just great accolades; and one that seeks wisdom, not just wealth. It is through living a meaningful life that you will make a difference in the lives of others.

Service to the community has also been an integral aspect of your experience at Heathwood. I recall the thousand-year flood of 2015 where many Columbia families were displaced, including families at Heathwood, yet you stood by not only Heathwood families, but those in the community – your brothers and sisters in need knowing that we all must live and rise together. Continue this spirit of service as you go along your journey.

No doubt there will be obstacles, but you will find your destiny through your struggles and discover your own path to success. So, periodically, I encourage you to ask yourself “what would you do if you weren’t afraid?” And then do just that.

## GUIDANCE TO THE GRADUATES

Now it is your time to rely upon the strengths you have built at Heathwood and forge ahead. Until today, others closely guided your success. But now, with the privilege of being here today, comes the high expectation to accept the responsibility of becoming leaders in creating a better world for others with compassion and hope. Moving forward, you will be your own northern star.

Before proceeding to your next destination, pause to renew your focus, rekindle meaningful relationships, and revisit your resolutions. Or perhaps closer to home for the graduates, as Lizzo has tweeted, “Put your phone down, close your eyes, count to ten. Think about how you can make the world a better place in the real world. We need you out here.”

## CONCLUSION

In closing, I remind you to hold God close to your heart and stay true to your values. Your talents and dedication brought you this far and will also be what propels you forward.

Now, by the power invested in me, I order you to fiercely embrace the unexpected!

Congratulations to the Heathwood Hall Episcopal School Class of 2022, you did it and you deserve all the good that is coming to you!!!! Thank you!!!