



# HEATHWOOD HALL

## STUDENT SPEAKER ROBERT GOLDEN'S COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

When I walked into my first day of Kindergarten at Heathwood Hall, I was shocked when I saw that nearly my entire class were albinos. Somehow Little Robert Golden didn't grasp the concept of race, but he knew the effects of albinism. Just a short while later I found out the truth. One day when my dad came home from work I sat with him and said, "Daddy, I have to tell you something...we're black."

I came to Heathwood as a complete stranger. My parents put me on a bus, and I was transported to a new place surrounded by new people, many of whom looked different from me and did things differently from me. I felt like a bit of an outsider. There were only a few of us who rode the bus...just two from Orangeburg.

I can remember being one of the few kids whose parents did not pack their lunch. So we had to wait in line for the cafeteria food. Kindergarten had lunch at the same time as middle school, so we were like ants surrounded by giants in that lunchroom. And to make things more unfortunate, it wasn't the good cafeteria food we had in the new building we have today, but the old cafeteria food that could not compare to whatever Alexander Roberts had in his thermos.

My story isn't unique: we all have stories of being in a new environment and feeling like a stranger. I remember the summer before freshman year when I heard about a student coming in from Connecticut who ran cross country. That summer I made sure I stayed in shape so this kid wouldn't take my Varsity spot. I remember the first time I met Liam Scanlon and asked about him running cross country. He told me that he'd gotten down here and gone for a run in the South Carolina heat and humidity and decided he would try swimming instead.

M Roney told me stories about having to get used to southern accents after coming from Arlington, Virginia, and even being corrected for saying "you guys" and not "y'all."

Graham and Nate came all the way from Canada. Living in a different country for a year in an apartment and spending some time away from their parents presents challenges that a lot of us would struggle to comprehend. Not to mention cultural differences between two different countries.

We all have stories of feeling out of place around new people... it's completely normal.

But that's the amazing thing about Heathwood – these feelings of being out of place never last long. Liam was able to find new friendship in his swimming teammates. Even though M's speech habits are different, we hear her speak every week as part of the executive council. And Graham and Nate have both become part of this school and country.

As for my experiences with being new, I was welcomed onto the bus by all the “big kids,” who made me feel like I was all their best friends. And even in the scary lunchroom, there was one giant who would say hi to me every day. Only at Heathwood can you find future Olympians saying hello to seven-year-olds. Yes, that giant was A'ja Wilson, and I didn't have the slightest clue who she was. We all came in as strangers, and now we are leaving connected as a family.

That's what Heathwood is, a family. As freshmen, when nearly a third of us went to the honor council, we were forgiven. That's family. When Mrs. Hagstette gave out her number in case we ended up in a strange place after prom and needed help. That's family. When we stood out in the freezing rain as the football team was getting blown out by Hammond sophomore year. That's family. Google meets with Mrs. Nelson or study sessions at Barnes and Noble with Mr. Blackstone. That's family. When the whole Upper School signed cards for Coach Scannella. That's family.

The love that we show at Heathwood is unconditional and knows no bounds. It's the type of love that has allowed us to try new things and develop our skills. We have built this family and have been through so much together. We've experienced the highs, like seeing Mr. McKnight fall into the dunk tank freshman year. We've been through lows, like losing a classmate to another school because he thought he could get more lacrosse wins. We experienced writing letters to Love's, begging them not to build a truck stop in Dr. Beasley's class, and then we experienced the guilt of stopping there to get a snack. And we have all experienced the pain of the Senior Exhibition. This is a class that has made impressive accomplishments in academics, the arts, and athletics, but as we exit these doors those accomplishments will mean little in comparison to all the accomplishments that are yet to be achieved.

Do not peak in high school.

If we spend our time dwelling in the past, reminiscing over what we were, then there is nothing promising that we will become. Life has so much more to offer than winning a State Championship or getting a high SAT score. Graduation is not the end goal, but the start of something new.

There is so much more for each of us to become. Heathwood has developed us into better problem solvers and critical thinkers. But Heathwood has not made us into future doctors and lawyers. Heathwood has taught us public service, but Heathwood has not

made us philanthropists. That's up to us. So if we truly gained what we needed from Heathwood, we are completely capable of success in life, whatever that looks like. It's our choice.

Legendary high school cross country coach Joe Newton told his team "Remember- you can make a choice in life to be average, to be good, or to be great. It's your choice. Mama didn't make it, your dad didn't make it, the preacher didn't make it, the teacher didn't make it, the coach didn't make it, you made it."

As we enter the world, remember that even though we may feel like strangers at first, we can get through it and make a new place home. Remember that we control our actions, so we can choose to be great and not to peak in high school. Finally, remember at the end of the day we have this Heathwood family to fall back on.

We as a class have to make an effort to support each other through life so that when we feel all alone in this world, we have someone to rely on. Maybe I'm just planting the seeds early so that a few years down the road I can ask Shelley for some money. I'm kidding. But I am serious about being able to depend on the people next to you right now. As I've likely exhausted my time I'd like our class to keep the words of The Spinners in our minds when we think of each other "Whenever you call me, I'll be there. Whenever you want me, I'll be there. Whenever you need me, I'll be there. I'll be around."

Thank you and Congratulations