

Soleil Richardson- Commencement Address

Good morning, families, faculty, underclassmen, and my fellow students in the class of 2024. If you don't know who I am, my name is Soleil Richardson, or as I am more often called, that girl who dances. I would like to firstly thank phys plant and Sage Dining for making today and every day special, the faculty who have done a great job at fostering my curiosity over the course of my four years, and my family who are the reason I am standing here today.

It is an honor to be standing before you today to share my final thoughts and reflections about high school. I have watched virtually every coming-of-age movie on the planet, so I feel quite prepared for this moment.

I want you all to picture a classroom. Desks in rows or a semicircle, a whiteboard, if you are in the chapel, you may be slightly chilled, if you are in the School House, it may smell a bit funky. To us, a classroom is a place of learning. It's a place where you learn your potential. It's a place of collaboration. Now I want you all to picture Sawyer Field (I am a dancer, so I am going to try my best), turf, a scoreboard, it's a place of learning. It's a place where you hone your potential, it's a place where you collaborate.

The dorm, the art studio, the gym... You could do this with a bunch of different places, but my point is classrooms are going to show up in a myriad of shapes during your life.

Today I want to offer 3 examples of non-traditional Williston classrooms: the dance studio, Wold House, and The Birch Dining Commons, and share with you how they have taught me perseverance, empathy and the importance of connection.

The first, the most prominent place of learning and growth, has been the dance studio on my right, in the Reed Campus Center. Williston dance has taught me the importance of discipline and grit, especially during our show this past Spring.

Normally our shows are around 12 dances long and last for about an hour. This spring, however, we all decided that we were insane and somehow created a show with 22 dances, huge platforms, and did it all within the span of ~6 weeks. Because our shows are no small feat, Grit and discipline became lessons well learned in the dance studio. For me, Williston Dance has unveiled the beauty of producing a show from start to finish, from audition week to strike. That is not to say the beautiful process came without a few ugly moments, but that is something that Noel St Jean, our amazing dance coach, and the team have helped me embrace.

I had the honor of sharing my dance captain title with 3 of the most talented, hardworking people all of whom are graduating today: Stella Gordon, Charlotte Zeng, and Nick Sobon. Perhaps no one has displayed perseverance quite like these Senior Captains (though I may be a little biased). We have all been dancing together for the past four years and I don't know if you all remember this thing called Covid, but it completely altered the course of our dance shows (aka we couldn't have them). But each day, we came in with our masks, tried our best, and even embraced the shame that was doing warmups outside on the quad. We have shown that even in the most unprecedented times, we can persevere to make art; a lesson I will cherish forever. When I came to Williston, I was 100% sure that I wanted to give my all to the Fine and Performing Arts Department. But what I didn't know was how much it would give me in return.

From not having recitals in our freshman year, to producing the biggest one in Williston history in our senior year, Williston Dance has truly taught me that with discipline, and perseverance; you can make a sick comeback.

Second, is Wold House. Dorm life is not for the weak. No, seriously I had no idea the rate at which a group of girls could put every bathroom out of commission.

Nonetheless, I wouldn't trade my time in the Williston Dorms for the world. I came to Williston from my home of Bermuda with my passport and I-20 visa in hand and was so eager for what dorm life had in store for me. The first thing I noticed was that it was EXACTLY LIKE THE MOVIES.

In my freshman year I lived in Wold House [that was called 194 at the time] over on the Res Quad and I instantly felt at home. There was something about the fact that it was covid and we were all leaving our families that made us so close so quickly. We bonded over decorating our masks and had endless movie nights. We learned the importance of recognizing each other's struggles and being there for one another. Meeting one of my dearest friends, Addison Kelly is by far my highlight of living in 194. I was drawn to Addi's necklace because it was like mine. Mine had an outline of Bermuda, and hers, The Cayman Islands. Our sing-songy accents soon blended as we often giggled about how no one could understand us. She was always a ray of sunshine and truly had a knack for knowing when her friends were upset, and how to make them laugh. Addi was the true definition of what it means to be kind-hearted.

It was not until after she passed, and I returned to live in Wold House as a junior proctor, that I realized how much she taught me about the true power of compassion and empathy especially in a dorm setting.

Being a proctor alongside my bestie and roommate Catie Spence, to lovely freshmen like Mia Townsend, Ruthie Butler, and Katie and Soph Toole has shown me that I have a true love for connecting with people and recognizing everyone's story, and I have Addi to thank for that. To those in the Class of 2024 whom she loved, and who loved her, I know she would be so proud of you.

Lastly, and perhaps the most nostalgic "classroom" is the Birch Dining Commons which showed me the importance of human connection. As you are probably tired of hearing me say, we are the COVID class, and that means there were no visitation hours for our first year and a half of high school. So, other than outside, the dining hall became the only place where my friends and I could hang out together. Though for the most part, we had plastic dividers in our face, we had no walls up when it came to getting to know one another. Some of my most fond connections were enhanced during our time in the Dining Commons.

The act of sitting down with a group that you wouldn't normally sit with teaches you how to connect with people and make conversation. I can still recall talking in the dining hall for well over 2 hours with my two best friends from freshman year Chase Livingston and Kevin Mwangi. I am lucky to still have them as my best friends today and also happy to report that we still sit in the dining hall for hours and just talk. The dining hall has taught us and so many others the value of just spending time with one another, of sharing stories, of laughing.

I share these anecdotes with you all today because my experience has taught me that the classroom isn't exclusively that. And now I pass that message on to you. Perhaps the greatest classrooms exist outside of academic buildings. Perhaps I wouldn't have learned the importance of relying on others had I not spent hours in the dining hall with my friends. Or maybe, thanks to the dance studio, I know that when you're lost, you just need to improvise until you find your footing again. And without the dorm I may not have known to prioritize compassion.

So, to the class of 2024, let us not limit our learning and growth to the academic day. When you are walking around Princeton, Union, St. Andrews, or Chapman, remember that life is full of constant learning, often in new places, and to embrace it.

Let us not forget that life is the best teacher and experience is simply the name we give our past mistakes. Let us not forget the wise words of Zac Efron in the closing scene of High School Musical 3 “We truly are all in this together. Because once a WildCat always a WildCat”. Let us not forget that Williston has not only prepared us for college in the School House, and Scott Hall, but also on Sawyer Field, and in the theatre. Know that learning is about growth and growth is not about perfection. In the same way, all the world is your stage, make all the world your classroom. Thank you.