

## **2019 Graduation Speech**

By Zora Young

Good Evening everyone, my name is Zora Young and I am honored to speak on behalf of the Class of 2019. You all have shaped my life in ways that I could not imagine, and I love each and every single one of you. Thank you to family, friends, trustees, and faculty for being here today to celebrate this class and our accomplishments. Your support throughout this journey has enabled us to be the diverse, loving, and intellectually curious young women we are today.

At Convocation in August, our Student Council President welcomed us all to the school year and said that we can have the time of our lives as long as we are our authentic selves. Staying true to who you are and what you believe in is one of the most difficult things young adults face in the 21st century, especially girls. The heavy influence of social media alongside the demands of attending a competitive school can easily influence our actions and emotions. More importantly, it affects the perception and way we see ourselves. After being part of this class for the last eight years, I am happy to say that we are the most unique, funny, and as Dr. Jack said last night at Step Singing, nicest people you are ever going to meet.

Some of us have already devoted our lives to being dog moms, some of us are skilled aerialists, some have participated in the Junior Olympics, and one of us has been recognized by the King of Saudi Arabia for their success in STEM. As you can see, our interests and talents are diverse and very widespread. We are artists, activists, scientists, and state champions. This is one of the main reasons I love this class and am so proud to be a part of it. Our genuine nature, how we have grown to be unapologetically ourselves, and how we are different, has unified us.

Harpeth Hall does not teach us what to think, but rather how to think. It is our safe haven, and a place like no other. Our faculty is our second family, our college counselors are the best support system we could ask for, and our teachers serve as mentors and some of our biggest role models. They never gave up on us and always inspire us to be better versions of ourselves.

When I look back on my strenuous and incredibly difficult journey in Harpeth Hall math, I see these qualities most vividly. I am not exaggerating when I say that my advisor and math teacher held my hand every step of the way through my 5th and 6th grade math courses. She still looks out for our class today and if it weren't for her, I strongly believe I would not have taken Calculus this year. Despite my inability to remember the Order of Operations and understand overall

concepts, my Senior year teacher always tried to check in during class with a “Did you catch that Zora?” or “Ms. Young, you look confused” every 20 minutes. I knew I was seen and supported. This constant reassurance always made me feel at ease with my struggle, and I came to realize that trying is the most important step to success.

Our teachers and faculty do everything in their power to help us succeed. They have showed us that our worth is not determined by a grade and that our talents and abilities are meaningful both in and outside of the classroom. With this in mind, we stopped comparing ourselves to each other and grew to realize our strengths and accepted our weaknesses as individuals. Support and attention like this is hard to find, but at Harpeth Hall, it is noticeable and felt every time a faculty member asks us how we are doing, how was our weekend, and my personal favorite, when was the last time you slept? Considering Dr. Balmer’s words, an all-girls education is not about the absence of boys, it is about young women finding their potential artistically, intellectually, and athletically. There are not enough words to describe the immense love and encouragement that permeates throughout this campus. In the simplest way, Harpeth Hall is like the book you don’t want to put down and never will.

Now, with all of that being said, we are very ready to be done with high school. This moment seems unreal for all of us as we remember watching our first Convocation, meeting with our first and last advisors, and signing the wall to go to college. We have endured countless sleepless nights, stressful exam weeks, and Dr. Echerd’s tests. And every single minute was worth it to be here today and to be the confident and determined women we are.

And graduates, we have done some pretty impressive things during our time at the Hall. We put on the best George Washington there ever was, we have participated in 4 state championships, we created the most incredible prom, and we supported an organization devoted to empowering women. Our time spent here is something we will never forget. There is nothing like eating a tea cake at lunch, hanging out in the Senior House with your friends during a free block, watching a live Key-tar performance in the middle of the junior lobby, and sitting in advisory telling stories that make you laugh to the point of tears. Moments like these are what got us through the last four years.

To conclude, I would like to take a look into what is to come for the Dancing Queens. As we head off to college in the coming months, it is important for us to know that our place in this world is wherever we want it to be, and no one can tell

us otherwise. Maya Angelou said, “Each time a woman stands up for herself, she stands up for all women.” And as Dr. Jack stated last night, we have the power to change the world and bring peace to all. If we remember these ideals, and we carry the strength and confidence we have gained here, there is no limit to what we can accomplish.

Family, friends, and faculty, you are looking at the present and future of this world, and I can assure you that we are capable and eager to make you proud. Thank you for getting us here and allowing us to find our own authenticity and dance to our own jive. To the younger classmen, embrace every moment and know that you are well supported. We all believe in you. And lastly to my 98 sisters, thank you for always having my back, and for trusting me with this honor. I found myself through all of you. And I want you to know that I will carry the friendships I have made with you all for the rest of my life.

Thank you.