



The Investiture of Jess Hill as the Seventh Head of School of The Harpeth Hall School
March 29, 2019

Remarks by Virginia Callen, Class of 2023 – Middle School Student Speaker

Good morning. My name is Virginia Callen, and I am in the 8th grade.

We define leadership for the Harpeth Hall girl as “someone who is aware of the value of each individual in a community and accepts her responsibility to shape the community for the better.” The leadership curriculum in the Harpeth Hall Middle School is organized so that students develop a unique leadership skill during each grade level. In fifth grade, students learn to lead themselves as they enter a new environment. Next year in sixth, students begin to lead within the community. Seventh graders build on this by leading as a team. Finally, in 8th grade, students take the lead and use their acquired skills to lead the entire Middle School community. We are given the opportunity to join groups such as the Student Council or the Honor Education Committee to serve as role models for the students. Interacting with younger students has been one of my favorite experiences of my 8th-grade year. As 8th graders, we lead Bear Families, groups of girls from every grade who join together for fun activities.

The value of good leadership appears often throughout life at Harpeth Hall from the classroom, to the gym, and to the stage. During a recent dance company rehearsal, Mrs. Hammy asked the girls in my group “who is a leader in this dance?” Sweaty and tired from our long rehearsal, we glanced at one another in search of an answer. We had not been assigned a dance captain or repetrice for this dance yet, and no one was quite sure who was in charge aside from the choreographer, senior Margaret Pugh, who was not present at the time. After a period of silence, I replied, “We are all leaders because we go to Harpeth Hall and that’s what we’re taught to do.” My response earned a few chuckles and maybe even a smile from Mrs. Hammy. I will admit, I was trying to be funny at the time. Leadership is a word we hear so often at Harpeth Hall that we often forget how important it is.

Good leadership is a quality we are encouraged to embrace. In Dance Company, we actively implement the qualities that make a good leader. In any dance, each dancer is responsible for learning the choreography, fixing her mistakes, and making an effort to make each run-through of the dance better than the last. Each girl must first lead herself or risk having the entire dance fall apart. Only the individual dancer can control if she is dancing with maximum effort or “full out” as we refer to it. Within the larger group, different dancers lead from their areas of strength. One dancer may be detail oriented to the counts of the dance. Another may pay close attention to the foot movements. For another, the “head tail connection” Mrs. Hammy often refers to might come naturally. These leaders set good examples for others to follow, and they teach the skills they have mastered to the rest of the group. They work diligently to make the dance a success and to create an encouraging and enjoyable team environment.

While all must lead themselves, the true leader in any community is the person who sets the example for *how* to do so. It is important to remember that great leaders are great team members first. A leader in dance may inspire another dancer by encouraging her to achieve more than she thought she could. A strong leader knows when to step back and encourage others to step forward. She is as much of a follower as she is a leader, and she allows others to take center stage. When all team members learn to lead well and to follow well, the team is able to inspire and positively impact the wider community.

The all-girls environment at Harpeth Hall offers a unique opportunity for girls to develop leadership skills. Being with other girls allows students a sense of authenticity difficult to find in a society which focuses heavily on gender-oriented stereotypes. No one demonstrates the importance of staying true to oneself better than our seventh head of school - Mrs. Jess Hill.

As a past math teacher, a past director of the Upper School, and the mother of two Harpeth Hall graduates, Mrs. Hill knows our school well. She is admired for her humility and her strength of character, both of which make her a positive role model. She encourages us to work hard, to take risks, to make mistakes, and to dismiss the myth of perfection. Mrs. Hill - on behalf of the students, thank you for your dedication to us, to Harpeth Hall, and for being our number one leader.