

ALUMNI SPEAKER: TAWFIQ (“TY”) ABDUL-KARIM (DC PREP CLASS OF 2009)

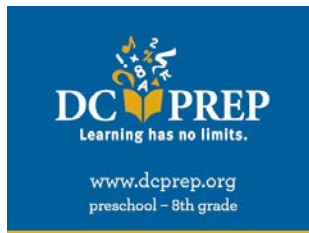
Good afternoon parents, faculty, family members, and soon-to-be graduates.

My name is Ty Abdul-Karim. I graduated from DC Prep in 2009, went on to Woodberry Forest School where I was a member of the Class of 2013. I will be embarking on my senior year at Gettysburg College in the fall. First and foremost, I would like to thank DC Prep for inviting me back today. It is such an honor and privilege to deliver this year’s commencement address to the DC Prep Class of 2017!

Just a few weeks ago, a mere two days after my 22nd birthday, I received a text from Mr. Kelly from PrepNext asking if I was interested in speaking at today’s graduation. My first thought was, “Are you sure?” I honestly didn’t know what to think. My head was immediately filled with a rainbow of thoughts and emotions that ranged from extreme excitement and honor, to absolute and utter horror. I thought it was amazing that they had chosen me among others to give this address, but at the same time I was afraid of not knowing exactly what I wanted to say to you today. Thankfully, that phase has passed, and I have figured out what I want to say to you all and how I want to frame my speech. Hence this neatly typed out commencement address that I spent countless hours sweating and contemplating over.

Let me start off by saying that I am not here to lecture you on “making a difference” or “making change” or anything you’ve heard already. No. I felt that the most appropriate way to approach this address is just to be honest, to let you know who I am, what my journey was, and offer a few bits of advice that I would have found very useful just before entering high school.

As a graduate of DC Prep, I know what it’s like to walk those halls. I remember the Prep Dollars or “additions” as they are now called, the uniforms, and daily Prep Checks every morning. Reflecting on those fateful four years of my life, I know I wasn’t the best kid, but I also wasn’t the worst. Even though I’m standing up here today, I, too, had my fair share of screw-ups. I remember spending time in detention and even took a few trips to the Dean’s office for a meeting or two. I remember one time, I was sitting in science class during my 5th grade year, doing the usual—cutting up, talking with friends. And then all of a sudden, everyone got real quiet and started looking at me. Confused, I tried to make sense of what was going on. You know how the doors of every room have a little window in them? I could see *my mom* peeking through the window... staring right at me with a stone face... That was the last time I remember cutting up in class!



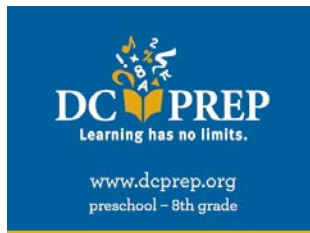
In all seriousness, I believe that DC Prep, aside from preparing me for the academic rigors of an excellent high school, planted the seeds for me to grow into a respectful, productive member of my community—or any community I may find myself in in the future. The truth of the matter is that everyone makes mistakes, and everyone gets in trouble every now and then. The difference comes in how you learn from those mistakes and what choices you make moving forward. The lessons that I learned at DC Prep really stayed with me and helped me throughout my time there, in high school, and even today in college. DC Prep preached to do the “R.I.G.H.T.” thing: The Respectful, Intelligent, Genuine, Hardworking, Team oriented thing. When it comes down to it, it really is that simple.

You guys are all graduating today and I know for a fact that you are all smart individuals, so I don’t feel that it is necessary to go through each of these points one by one. However, I will highlight a few that have helped me a lot along my journey.

First, do the respectful thing: Respect yourself and respect others. It all starts with respecting yourself, doing the best thing for you and taking care of you first. Self-respect is a choice. It is about having the courage to stand up for yourself and knowing that you deserve to be surrounded by great people who respect themselves as well.

Having respect for yourself is vital to promoting a positive self-image, one that allows you to feel confident in yourself and your abilities, and allows others to see that and respond accordingly. By extension, I learned that respect for others means treating others with the same care and regard that you would show yourself or someone you care very much about, like your parents or a sibling. Having a firm understanding of what respect means for yourself and others is very important as you all continue to grow and learn because it can open so many doors for you in the future. When you respect yourself, people are drawn to you, and they are almost forced to view you in a positive light just by the way you carry yourself. You can take another step forward when others see that you respect them, and that you care about their well-being and their beliefs. Having respect allows you to put forth your best self and gives others the opportunity to connect and work effectively with you to reach a common goal.

Being able to respect yourself and others is very important not only in high school, but throughout life. As you guys will soon learn, in high school not everyone is like you. People come to school with their own backgrounds, ways of life and thinking, previous experiences and so forth and so on. My high school experience was sort of an amplified version of this fact. As a student at Woodberry Forest, which is one of the oldest private boarding schools in the south, I was exposed to a very diverse pool of individuals as my classmates came from all over the country. I left DC Prep where most of my classmates were from DC, and where we shared the same race, neighborhoods, and interests, and I went to Woodberry Forest, where there was no telling who or what I was going to run into. My classmates there were from Texas, Alabama, Pennsylvania, North Carolina— you name it. Some of them liked rap music, some of them played the

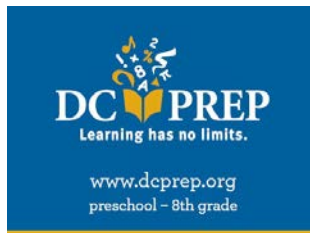


cello. Some of them enjoyed rock climbing, or fishing, or lived in big cities or on farms. I basically had to be prepared for anything, especially as an African American Muslim.

I've had run-ins with kids who were racist or had their own false ideas about my religion. I had to learn that not everyone is like me, not everyone thinks the same way as I do, and no matter how wrong they might be or how hard it is to deal with them, everyone deserves respect and kindness. You must have enough respect for yourself and others so that you can engage in constructive dialogue with people who have different understandings of the world. You must respect them and their understandings so that you may learn from one another and grow to become better people as a result of having those difficult conversations.

I am here to tell you all that you will rarely achieve your goals by treating others with disrespect. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said during the midst of one of the darkest moments of our nation's history, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." This quote stresses the importance that to succeed and grow, as individuals and as a society, we must learn to love and respect one another regardless of difference. You guys will go far when you believe in respecting others, even when they act hostile towards you. Yes, it is important to be aware of your self-worth and fight for what you believe in, but you must understand when it is appropriate and learn how to do it without just butting heads with people. Progress is hard to come by when you disrespect others. When you respect yourself and others, it gives others the opportunity to see your humility and makes them more willing to want to understand you and work with you. Always respect yourself and others.

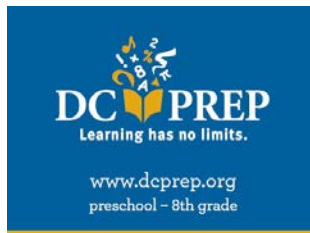
Secondly, do the intelligent thing. Intelligence is the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills. Intelligence is obviously very important for you young scholars who have spent countless hours in the classroom guided by your marvelous teachers here. They have helped you spread your wings and engage in your academic passions so that you may excel. However, intelligence is not only about the ability to gather the knowledge, but also about internalizing your experiences and using them to your advantage. As DC Prep students, you are all blessed with wonderful teachers who want you to succeed and do their best job to make sure you all are on the straight and narrow. There are so many checks and balances in place at DC Prep, that as a student it is very easy to overlook the importance of them and really forget their purpose. You guys have Prep Notes and agenda books that are used to help you stay on task in class, manage your behavior, and guide you as you work on your own at home. The key thing that I want to focus on here in addition to intelligence, is accountability.



As you all grow, you will find that you will naturally gain more freedom. You will find that you are going to be increasingly on your own. People are less likely to look over your shoulder to make sure that you are staying on task. Teachers won't assign you irresponsible "R" dollars for talking to your friend at the back of the class. And, you won't be required to write down your daily assignments in your agenda book, much less have them checked each morning to make sure that you are prepared for the rest of the day. No. As I learned in high school (and am still learning in college), you will have to do all of that on your own. You have to realize that no one can want success more than you; not your teachers, your parents, coaches, or classmates. You are the master of yourself and your experiences. You hold the keys to your own success. There will always be people along the way who are willing to help you, guide you and offer advice, but when it really comes down to it, you are the one that has to get it done. This is the importance of accountability. As a high school student you are endowed with a level of responsibility to take care of your own academic work and to lead yourself in order to reach your goals. It requires you to know your strengths, as well as your weaknesses, so that you can become more successful and so that others can feel that they can trust you and depend on you to do what you have set out to do. The good thing about this is that DC Prep has taught you how to be accountable on your own. You all know the benefits of checking yourself and making sure you're on task in class, you know how helpful it is to keep up with your assignments by making sure that you write them down and check them off each night. This will help you leaps and bounds throughout your academic career and give you an edge in the classroom, so remember to stay accountable.

And lastly, do the genuine thing. To be genuine means to be true to yourself; to be authentic. Being genuine means to have integrity and honesty in your interactions. In practice, this means that "your yes is your yes, and your no is your no". Be genuine to yourself, know who you are, know what you expect from yourself, and be honest when communicating with others. When you are genuine with yourself and in interactions with others, people are more likely to trust you and believe in your ability to do what you say. One thing I want to say about this is just to follow the "Golden Rule", which basically means to want for others what you would want for yourself. You wouldn't want someone else to lie to you, cheat on you, or to steal from you—so why would you allow yourself to do that to someone else? That is not fair in anyone's book. Being genuine will ultimately open a world of opportunity for you, and can turn you into the model citizens that you all aspire to be in the future.

A few weeks ago, I was at the basketball court and I had the pleasure of meeting a few of you. It was nice to see you all as it allowed me to reflect as I prepared for this speech. One of the things that I will leave you with today is that I envy your position. I envy your position because you guys have been well prepared for your future, and as time goes on the bar of excellence is being set higher and higher by people in your very shoes. As students of a graduating class in the year 2017, I am here to tell you that the sky is NOT the limit—In fact, astrophysicists will tell you, that limit is expanding more and more every day. I want to



encourage you all to reach *higher* than a high school diploma, and not to just be complacent with your efforts thus far, but rather to pursue your passions to college and beyond. Your next step is high school, but know that it is only your vehicle for going farther in life. As you grow, you will find difficulty, inspiration, and great joy along your journey. Use them to your advantage and as a stepping stone to reach far beyond where you once imagined you could go.

To wrap everything up, I want to leave you with this: Respect yourself and respect others, it will take you far in life. As you grow in the world and become more independent, you have more and more responsibility to yourself and to others. You will need to be more and more accountable so that people can depend on you to do what you have set out to do. Be genuine, honest, and straightforward in your interactions with others. Be a man or woman of integrity—one that is worthy of trust and respect. Your journey does not end here. This is called a commencement ceremony because this is your beginning.

And lastly, hold on to the rope of DC Prep. The people here really care about you and will continue to be behind you for support. Even though I graduated from DC Prep (you know...eons ago!), the people here continue to keep up with me and support me in whatever way they can. So hold on to their rope and never be afraid to ask for help because they will *always* respond.

Thank you.