

I would like to start with a formal thank you and greet our principal, Mr. Garrick, assistant principal Mr. Jones, school board president Mr. Doug Heil, the illustrious class of 2023, and all our parents, family, and friends who came to support us. My name is Richael Saka and I'm honored and humbled to stand before you today and speak on behalf of our class.

Faith, Family, Tradition. It's in our hallways, on our banners, and we've heard Mr. Garrick say it countless times. This mantra has echoed throughout our high school years. Family, especially, is the pillar that resonates the most with my experience at SFD and I think, perfectly encapsulates the dynamic of our very class.

Earlier in the year, during the pep assembly, our class challenged the teachers to a tug of war. As I grabbed onto the rope, I felt Jojo's elbow nearly knock the wind out of me, But at that moment, I also felt the strength of our class working **together**.

As we were all pulling together, I remember thinking how amazing it was that we could all work towards a common goal, despite our differences. Some of us were athletes, some were artists, and some were academic superstars. But at that moment, none of that mattered. We were all working together, pulling together with everything we had fueled by one more special ingredient: the support of our classmates cheering us on.

This is what family is all about, isn't it? It's about coming together, supporting one another through thick and thin. It's about recognizing and leveraging each other's strengths and weaknesses to build each other up.

Just like in that game of tug of war, we all have a role to play in our community and in our world. Each one of us has unique strengths and talents that, when combined, make us an **unstoppable** force in the pursuit of greatness.

Let's take a moment to reflect on a verse from the Bible that speaks to the heart of my experience as a member of the Saint Francis DeSales family. In Romans 12:5, it says, "so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others"

This verse reminds us that we are all connected - that we are all part of a larger family. And if you've watched Lilo and Stitch you'd know that "Ohana" means "family." and that "Family" means "no one gets left behind."

To me, family isn't just your little cousin telling you that you need some lotion for your ashy elbows, or your older sibling that you call any time you need them to Venmo you for McDonald's. It's the people you worked with on your CAP project even if you didn't see eye to eye, it's the people you spend hours with on Facetime after-school planning the Black History Month Assembly (shout out to Morgan), or the person you make fun of for their driving even though you have yet to get your license yourself (thanks Clarissa). My four years at DeSales have taught me that my family is with me the minute I step into the building.

As a family, we must always support one another and work together to achieve our goals. My mom sat with me the other night and helped me pick out that Bible verse and I find it incredibly fitting because she always taught me that a community is defined not by those who have the most, but who have the least. So as I stand in front of you all today, Let's take a moment to acknowledge not only those who will be receiving their diplomas here today but also celebrate and applaud our classmates who will be the first in their families to graduate high school; the first-generation Americans, the first to go to college, those who juggled school while working an extra job to contribute to their family's income, those who took care of siblings, nephews, and nieces, those who did not have the privilege to **only** focus on school, and finally those who could not be here with us today to share in this celebration. Let's give it up for them.

I'm here not on my own, none of us are, truly, but because I stood on the shoulders of teachers like Mrs. Scott, Mrs. Sharritts, and Mr. Kohler who never gave up on me when I was struggling. Mr. Gedeon and Ms. Wu who supported and encouraged me to go above and beyond, and Sr. Guelene who was always praying for me when I had hard decisions to make.

At St. Francis De Sales, there's something truly exceptional about our class—it defies convention. You see, we come from diverse races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and yet, we come together under one roof to embark on a shared journey of growth and learning, just like a family. As we go out into the world even beyond high school and college, we will face many challenges even beyond losing the football game we clearly should've won to that one school down the street this year, I urge you to face them with strength and resilience. Create a safe space for those who are afraid to speak up. Acknowledge the different opinions and perspectives you may have from your future classmates or co-workers, and remember that you have a choice every day to work with others toward the common good and a future that transcends any of us here. The power of community and support is immense. Lean on your family, friends, mentors, and teacher for guidance and support, and remember to ask for help.

I encourage you to be a force of nature. You are the future. You have the power to make a difference in the world. Matter of fact, you are *simply phenomenal*. I challenge each of you to see your classmates in a different light. See them no longer as the dude who ditched you in the lunch line sophomore year on calzone day, no longer as the girl you rear-ended in the parking lot, no longer as a stranger you passed by in the hallway, but as your sisters and brothers. Turn to the people beside you, shake their hands, and tell them "You are phenomenal".

Remember the lessons you have learned from your teachers, your fellow classmates, and your friends, and use them to shape a better tomorrow for us all, because graduating is not just an individual accomplishment, but a collective one. It represents the culmination of years of hard work, dedication, and sacrifice, not just on your part, but on the part of everyone who has supported you along the way. It represents the potential for a brighter future, not just for you, but for all those around you, the underclassman, your little siblings, and all who will come after you. So as you move forward, remember that you are not alone and that school is simply something you do, and that it does not define who you are.

You have a community that loves and supports you, I love you all and the world is waiting for you to make your mark, no matter what path you take after De Sales. Lastly, I want you all to take a note from our spring musical, Mary Poppins. "If you reach for the stars all you get are the stars... if you reach for the heavens you get the stars thrown in." So, Class of 2023, reach for the heavens. Congratulations! We did it!