

## **Baccalaureate Alumni Speech - Adriana Suarez '88**

I would like to thank Headmaster Seivold for inviting me to address everyone on this special day. When I got the call from Mr. Seivold, I was honored and excited and needless to say a little nervous for this opportunity. My kids were surprisingly, very happy for me with the only requirement that I not mention them. And why would I mention my daughter Tatiana Paula - Class of 2018 and your fellow grad mate Nico Paula - Class of 2022? After all the years of seeing Tatiana and Nico performing, speaking or walking across this stage I never imagined that I would be up here, and they would be in the seats watching me. They are thoroughly enjoying this I am sure.

When I accepted the invitation, I figured I've lectured residents and students for an hour in the past, a less than 10 minute talk should not be so hard. Gynecology is riveting when you have pictures and stories to go along with it. But obviously that is not an option for today.

So, since two topics I comfortably discuss are out, gynecology and my kids, that leaves us with what joins us here today. The Baccalaureate ceremony is a time where we can have a moment of thankfulness, reflection and appreciation for what you have accomplished as the Class of 2022. We are taking a pause after the past weeks of award ceremonies and celebrations. We have artistic achievers from drama, music and art who presented in front of the Mayor, around Florida and the nation. We have national competitors in debate, chess and robotics. We have all our student athletes- many who are ranked nationally or have been competing nationally on TV. We of course have all our amazing academic achievers. I mean what a great group of high performers you are. What a tough act to follow!

Many in the audience have siblings who have either graduated or are currently still attending Berkeley. Some of you are at Berkeley after moving into the area and finding that Berkeley was the right fit for you and your family. Several parents here today are fellow alums, some who have also been up here as well to speak at Baccalaureate. They, like myself, realized that our preparations and experiences at Berkeley are what made us successful and able to navigate challenges that we would encounter in our years after Berkeley.

My graduation year 1988 was the era of big hair, neon clothes, shoulder pads and Duran-Duran. What images will 2022 evoke thirty years from now? Well one big thing is the reawakening of the world after Covid-19. In the height of it, you were about to start the most challenging academic year of high school as the whole world was trying to figure out the pandemic. You were all modifying, isolating and challenging yourself academically, growing your extracurriculars and many trying to get noticed by athletic recruiters. All this while getting your transcript ready for college applications and of course taking your SAT's. These two years, as trying as they have been for all of us, have taught everyone how to do things differently. The whole world had to adapt to new ways of doing regular business and daily living. Currently at our house, we still have regular DoorDash, Uber Eats and Instacart deliveries at an almost embarrassing rate. Who would have thought Zoom or Team meetings would be a regular daily necessity for many businesses now or even for interviews? For many this has been a welcome change. Collectively the world found new ways and plans on how to function.

For many of you Berkeley, like it was for me, is all you have known. All of you have seen this campus grow while being here, whether it has been over the past 13 years or even just this past year. You will be able to say- "I was at Berkeley before there was a Chapel" or "before there were beach volleyball courts" or "before there was a Straz." I get to say I was at Berkeley before the lower division was on campus, before there were lights on the football field and when Gills hall was our Lykes and dining hall combined.

These next few years are going to be filled with new buildings, new friendships, new professors and lots of unfolded laundry. You might find that what you thought you were going to love in your new home as far as academics, athletics or even the campus was not what you imagined. After the whirlwind of graduation and summer you might realize like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, "Toto we're not in Kansas anymore"- and most of the time that is a good thing. Like everything, it takes time to adjust to your new normal.

Four years go by really fast. Just ask any of us parents. It seems like yesterday you were just starting high school. But, if after you have invested the time and effort, you realize you do not like your major, your campus or you are just not happy, there are always other options. You just need to be willing to accept it and explore those options. Remember, there is always another way, if plan "A" does not work there is always a plan "B" or maybe

even a plan “C” or “D”. Just like the world had to formulate new plans during the pandemic. Changing course throughout life is how we become more successful, whether that course change was from choice or even from failure.

I had a major “change of plans” moment after college. I was a four year student athlete and played volleyball as a middle blocker which nowadays I am considered short for a middle blocker. After applying and not getting accepted to medical school I had my first experience at a new plan. I had always pictured myself as a physician, that was all I knew. How was I going to make that a reality now that my dreams had been crushed? Well, I decided to take a chance and apply to a foreign medical school. I was immediately accepted and after a year of studying hard and proving myself, I was able to transfer and graduate from the University of Miami Medical School. While studying and training in Miami, I realized that one of my strengths as a physician and what distinguished me in Miami, was my ability to speak Spanish.

I am the daughter of Colombian immigrants. My father is a pathologist who originally came for his residency at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland and my mother obtained her PhD in Clinical Psychology at USF. English was my second language when I started Berkeley in first grade. When I was young, I even used to change my name to Kathy to sound less ethnic. The one thing I used to be ashamed of was actually something that I was now using daily to help others.

Everyone has or acquires that special something that separates them from others. The key is figuring it out and then using it. There is a documentary recently released called “The Rescue” which chronicles the 2018 rescue of the soccer team of young boys trapped in a cave during the monsoon season in Thailand. There was a poignant moment where the rescuers, who were recreational deep cave divers, were interviewed. These men, from different parts of the world, had all been quiet, lonely boys and sometimes even bullied while growing up. But in this twist of fate, their unique hobby and personality traits were now the only possible chance for these stranded boys to be rescued. I found it profound that at any point, anyone can make a difference just by sometimes being different. Now of course speaking Spanish is not a unique trait, but it has been an asset to my practice for all these years. Currently, I volunteer regularly at a local charity center where I can take care of a primarily Hispanic population. The Berkeley motto is “Berkeley puts people in the world

who make a positive difference”. I used to think the way to make a difference in the world was to go to remote areas and provide a service, but sometimes that “world” where you can make a difference is right in your backyard. As you venture out, remember you all have something to offer and sometimes it takes a few roads to figure it out.

As you start on your journeys leaving Berkeley, let us take a moment to think about how lucky you were to have a lower, middle and upper division all on the same campus. How many of your senior friends from other schools have a kindergarten buddy? How many of your friends have been able to sing the twelve days of Christmas every year, with all grades present and then finally able to sing the well-earned last strain as a senior? How many get to have an all school Halloween parade? How about the coveted senior only milkshakes? How many schools have a Pipe and Drum Corps? These are all small things outside of academics that will make your Berkeley memories so special.

So, as your time together winds down, look around and remember this moment.

You have all experienced that joy of achieving something together whether it is in athletics, academics or bowing to a cheering crowd. All these memorable moments you did together under one name, Berkeley. I still fondly remember the moment in 1986 when we won the volleyball state championships at home in the Dimmit gym, with all our Berkeley schoolmates rushing the court.

I can't believe that now I find myself wrapping up another phase in my own Berkeley journey – that of a Berkeley parent. I am the proud mother of now 2 Berkeley graduates and am very excited to welcome them and all of you, the Class of 2022, into the extension of the Berkeley family- the Alumni family. Please do not be a stranger, come by campus when you are home, say hi to your teachers, friends and staff. Most importantly keep in touch with each other, because as it is with family you are always welcome and will always be supported. Congratulations Class of 2022 and best of luck in your roads ahead.

GO BUCS!

