Give a Great Valedictorian Speech --Joey Asher

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Veteran Speech Coach Joey Asher Provides a Template for an Engaging Graduation Speech

— You thought becoming the valedictorian of your high school class was tough? That's nothing compared to giving a great valedictory speech. Spend just a few minutes on YouTube and you'll see that most valedictory speeches are boring and, worse, embarrassing.

But there's hope! You can give a great valedictory speech, says Joey Asher, president of Speechworks, an Atlanta-based public speaking skills coaching firm. Asher is the author of three books on communication skills. His new book being released this month is "How to Win a Pitch: The Five Fundamentals that Will Distinguish You from the Competition."

Great valedictory speeches follow a pattern, says Asher. They offer a fond reflection on the high school years. They connect with audiences using anecdotes and lots of name-dropping. And they offer gratitude. With that in mind, the key to a great valedictory speech is to keep it simple, short (ten minutes is perfect), mention lots of people by name, tell stories, and practice it so much that you don't have to read it. You want to deliver it like you're having an animated chat with a close friend.

Below is Joey Asher's template for a great valedictory speech.

My fellow graduates, over the last four years here at [Insert name of school.], *we have learned a lot. Mr.* [Insert name of math teacher.] *has taught us how to* [Insert a complicated sounding math thing.]. *Ms.* [Insert name of English teacher.] *taught us* [Insert interesting tidbit from a favorite piece of literature.]. *And Mr.* [Insert name of widely known funny, popular teacher.] *has taught us* [Insert something odd that parents might be surprised to learn. For example maybe he taught you how to swear in Portuguese. Or maybe he taught you the best way to approach a girl at a dance. Make it funny but revealing about a beloved teacher.].

And all of this knowledge will no doubt be valuable to us as we go forward in life. But I think that the most important thing that we have learned over the last four years is [Insert major theme. Keep the theme simple. Good themes include "How to build relationships and rely on each other," "How to Work Together as a Community," "How to respect each other's differences," and "How much we need each other to succeed." Don't worry if it's corny. If it's from the heart, go for it.].

Over the next few minutes, I'd like to talk about what we've learned the people we have to thank, and the people we have to remember. [Notice that you're setting up a little three-part structure, letting your listeners know where the speech is going.]

I told you that the most important thing that we learned was [Restate the theme.].

Let me give you just a couple of examples of what I'm talking about. [Give three or four quick and fun examples that bring in as many of your classmates' names as possible. People love hearing their names. One of the examples might sound like this. "In ninth grade with our first pizza drive, we raised a lot of money for homecoming. It was a true team success. John Smith was our pizza baker. Cindy Jones showed us how to track and spend the money. Fred Williams played a critical role in getting people to turn out for the event with his creative posters. And Garth taught us that indeed one

person can eat three entire pies in one sitting." Give one longer example that is personal. For example, you might tell about how one of your teachers took an interest in your writing and encouraged you to submit your stories for publication. Be sure to tell about how you thought the story was really stupid but your teacher disagreed. Be sure to thank the teacher by calling her out from the audience, asking her to stand and asking the audience to give her a round of applause. Finish the story by telling how this teacher taught you that "Nothing we accomplish is done alone. Rather, we need each other for support and coaching."]

Next, I'd like to take a moment on behalf of myself and my fellow graduates to thank the people that have brought us here.

[Pick five or six people to thank. But don't just give their names. Tell why you're grateful to them. And in telling why, give anecdotal context. For example, "I'd like to thank my mother Wendy Johnson, who taught me that if I want to make it to the bus stop on time, I can't spend 20 minutes checking Facebook." Or "I'd like to thank my Math teacher, Ms. Jackson, who drilled into my head "Getting the right answer isn't everything. How you get there is important. So show me your stinking work!"]

Finally, I'd like to take a moment to remember our classmates and teachers who are not with us today.
[Here is where you mention anyone in your school community that died during your years in school. Once again, don't just give their names. Give their names and then give a personal remembrance. "We all miss our friend Jenny Wilson. She was a wonderful sister and daughter, a great friend, and the best cheerleader on the squad. We also miss our teacher Mr. Carson. Mr. Carson didn't allow us to show up late in his class. And we loved him for his humor. No one went through his class unchanged for the better."]

So now we're graduates. And soon we're going to be signing each others' yearbooks and saying goodbye. There will be hugs and tears. We'll do our best to stay in touch. But we'll be living our lives and doing our best.

As a final thought going forward, I'd like to leave you with a quote from [Insert name of someone you'd like to quote. The best people to quote are people that you've personally learned from, like your parents or grandparents. For example, "My grandfather told me that 'A high school education is a great thing just as long as you're willing to learn something after you graduate'."] *He said,* [Insert final quote.]

Thank you all.

One of the country's preeminent experts on selling skills and communication, Joey Asher is President of Speechworks, an Atlanta-based communication and selling skills coaching firm that has been helping business people communicate more effectively for over 20 years. Asher combines his skills as an attorney and journalist to help readers and clients rise above their competition. Joey Asher is also author of Selling & Communication Skills for Lawyers, and Even a Geek Can Speak: Low-Tech Presentation Skills For High-Tech People. To read Joey's blog go to www.talkingpointsblog.com or visit www.speechworks.net. -

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About the author:

Joey Asher is a professional communication and selling skills coach who has worked with executives, managers, and salespeople at dozens of firms including The Home Depot, Georgia Pacific,and UPS. Joey has written three books on presentation skills and selling.

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