

Classmates, parents & families, faculty, and school board members...welcome and thank you for coming to celebrate the Class of 2017's graduation.

Valedictorian. A label I have earned, but not a label that defines who I am. By the end of my speech, I think you will understand what I mean. The other night, we received our compliment cards. As you remember we did this in 8th grade as well. My card has been on my refrigerator for the last four years. Some of the compliments on both of my cards were "smart" and "athletic," but the compliments that really mean something to me are ones like: kind hearted, incredibly genuine, cares about others. These are the ones that reflect the kind of person I try to be. I would much rather be remembered as an "awesome friend" instead of a "great runner."

I want this speech to be inspiring. I want to tell you to chase your dreams, and the future is yours and all those other graduation quotes that we often hear. But I also want to be real. I would like to share some personal things with you. I want you to be able to relate in case you have or will experience similar things.

I have had a lot of successes in my 18 years, and for those, I am grateful and proud. But my life is not perfect, though many have said it is. I grew up in a divorced household. In my younger years, I had an anxiety disorder called selective mutism, which kept me from speaking out loud. In middle school, I struggled with an eating disorder. In early high school, I battled

depression much worse than you might know. I tried to hide most of it because I didn't want anyone to know that I had my own problems. Now, I am no longer embarrassed or ashamed. I even consider it a blessing, because with my recovery, I have been able to help others, which is the best feeling. With support from my family, I managed to work through my issues and learned at an early age that no matter what obstacles life throws at you, you can get through them. I want to take this moment to thank my parents, for always being supportive and encouraging, but also holding me responsible to my decisions.

We all want to be successful, but the truth is, we are probably going to experience more hardships in life than successes. We have grown up in a world where our parents fix everything for us and we get awards for simply participating. But that is not the real world. Life is unfair. We can't always control what happens in our life, but we can control how we choose to deal with those circumstances.

In the next few years, you may not have the college experience you were hoping for. As we head into adulthood, we might be faced with problems such as alcohol or drug abuse. It might be a divorce, loss of a job, or the loss of a loved one. My hope for you if you face any of these or other obstacles in your life, is that you find the strength to overcome it. Know that you are not alone, even though you might feel that way at the time. Surround yourself with people who encourage and support you and distance yourself from those that bring you down or want to see you fail.

Two weeks ago, I had the honor of attending the U.P. Sports Hall of Fame banquet. Some of the inductees included an olympic athlete, a professional wrestler, and an NCAA Division 1 track & field record holder. Listening to their speeches, there were common themes among each of these great U.P. athletes. They were all humble, and they all gave credit for their success to others, whether it be their parents, coaches, or teammates. They all talked about how achieving greatness is not about their past accomplishments, but about how they strive to live a great life every day.

Classmates, you are responsible for your life...you are going to make some mistakes and face obstacles along the way....it's inevitable. It's okay if you do. Learn from them, move on, head in a different direction. Know that nothing is ever quite as bad as it seems in that moment. And remember, you are not defined by that one circumstance. You are not your past. You are defined by how you choose to live your life every day from here on out. So, take those compliment cards, put them in a place to remind yourself of all the good that others see in you. And choose to be successful by living a life of greatness every day.