

Commencement Address to Class of 2015
East Harlem School
June 12th, 2015

In just a few minutes, you will be graduates of the East Harlem School, and rising high school students. Between now and then I'd like us to pause to think about what you take with you, and what you leave behind. As we do that, I'd like to actually use some of your own words, through your poetry, which you shared so poignantly at the Poetry Slam.

In fact, as **Charisse** wrote, "I look up into infinity", "and slowly time begins to stop." As you look up into the seeming infinity of your school years ahead, *this* is that moment, where time stops.

I asked **Charisse and Fatima** "Why poetry at EHS?" and they said "EHS really wants to push you to try new things." And the school wants "to help us with articulation in front of big groups," to "face our fears in presenting."

... In other words, to help you find your voices. That's something EHS has been nurturing in you, and wants you to take with you.

There are plenty of times when I wish I had found my voice. When I was 12, in public school in Queens, kids would come up to me and ask, "Are you white?" I'd say no. "Are you black?" No. "Are you Puerto Rican?" No. "So then what are you?" And my answer was a lame, "Well I'm from America *but* my parents are from India", as if I had to apologize for it. Now I'm proud of my roots and the skin color that sprouts from them.

When I was 18 in college I would go door to door in the dorm selling bagels to make money. One of the football players opened his door, looked down at me and laughed over his shoulder back to his friends in a way somehow meant to hurt, "Ah look, a Mexican selling bagels!" I took a breath, and sold him a bagel. Of course if I could do it all over I would have said to him "Quisiera dos o tres, caballero? Usted es obviamente inteligente, y rico, y guapo" ... "con una cabeza de calabaza..."

One time I did find my voice. I was 13 and I was being mugged. It was the dead of winter, at night, and I had just finished delivering pizza pies and was cutting through the darkened basement corridor of the apartment complex we lived in, Lefrak City in Queens. Out of the shadows a tall guy who must have been 18 grabbed me, pinned me against the wall and growled "Gimme all your money." Now, having been jumped before, I had learned by this time that if you just forked over all your money you were a sap; but if you said "I don't got no money" and it turned out you did, well then you were in for punishment. So what did you do? I looked up at the guy and said, "All you find all you keep". It seemed fair to make him work for it. Lucky for me, he wasn't crazy, and he was lazy. He reached into one of my pockets, grabbed a few dollars and ran. And the money in my other pockets and my sneakers was safe.

Now I don't know if that would work in the modern day, but it did in its time, and so will your voice.

How to use our voice is something we learn over time.

Fatima draws us into the Nail Salon where her mother sees customers, "... their extended fingers pointing precisely in front of her... They know that my mother will do her job silently." But Fatima follows with "I will not sit submissively, or silently... Someday I'll stand behind a big wooden bench, a *Judge* who makes things fair."

To be soft-spoken and yet outspoken. Mahatma Gandhi had it. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had it. You might think it's a gift. But it can be learned. You've been discovering here that *you have it within you too.*

Now, sometimes finding your voice is in knowing when *not* to speak.

Jada writes that her grandfather's *five-mile* walk to school, and home, every day with his brothers "was *not* the hardest part of their journey", for "When the bus passed, white children wearing new clothes would throw rocks and sticks at my grandfather". They "threw their ignorance."

Some years after Jada's grandfather endured those walks to school and home, Jackie Robinson would be the first African American to endure the walk to home plate on a Major League Baseball field. Before he took the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers, the team owner tested him, asking "What are you going to do if a white ballplayer comes up to you and socks you in the cheek?" And Jackie Robinson looked right back at him and said "I've got another cheek." And he went on to be better than his tormentors, not only as a player, but as a person. And *they* came to follow *him*.

Antonio wrote of his father that "He taught me to wait". That works in his example of fishing, and in using your voice.

At this stage in life, when someone says something that really bothers you, I think the secret is to pause, maybe count to three. And then speak. I can tell you from personal experience, when I don't pause and I just blurt something out, 95% of the time I regret it. Except if it's funny. Then I regret it 50% of the time.

In other words, as you continue to find your voice, learn to disagree without being disagreeable.

When you can blend your views with those of people who don't think like you, you can do very creative things. It can be hard when you and they each have different, strong views. But take that thought with you, and try.

Sometimes in life you may have to just stand alone, with yours a lone voice. When she was 22 my niece took a job teaching in Atlanta. She got close to the other teachers, but at one point some of them, and the principal, tried to get her to join them in altering the test scores of the kids, to make the school look better so it could get more government money. She had a predicament – should she go along in order to get along, or stand alone and risk being cast out from her group? If she said *no* to them, they'd turn on her, come after her, and she'd have to face them down every day. She had little time to make a decision. What do you do? Well she resisted the pressure, and was given a rough time, but was able to look herself in the mirror knowing she had done the right thing. She's now the principal of her own school. As for those other teachers and their principal? They were caught, they admitted guilt, they were fired and they lost their licenses. They won't be able to teach or work in education again in Georgia.

Sometimes we have to make what feel like split second decisions that could have big consequences later. My advice is, once again, to pause, close your eyes and think of what the right thing to do is.

As you continue to find your voice, what are you going to do with it? In the years of high school ahead of you, I hope you'll start to explore your passions. I say passions, because doing really well at something means giving it your all. Michael Jordan worked out *after* Chicago Bulls games. He loved what he did that much. If you love what you do, you'll put in that much more effort, and will do that much better at it. You know what I like as much as the EHS Performance Honor Roll? The *Effort* Honor Roll.

Now at some point, at school, at home, in life, we all grow up. In describing her own life, **Latoya** shared that *she* felt as "No longer a child anymore." Sometimes we grow up at our own pace. Sometimes it's thrust upon us. You've grown up more than you know. You will take that with you, and it will serve you well in high school... And yet you still know how to "frolic."

Jayleen writes, "Those others, trapped outside, will never know the joy of frolicking in our beautiful backyard." For all of *you*, that backyard has been *here*.

You've been surrounding yourself with good friends with good hearts. Keep doing that.

Antonio speaks of work *outside* school, "We fill the house with work, talk and Mexican music. My father, uncles and cousins." He could have been talking about filling *this* house, *this* school, with work, talk and, well I'm not sure about Mexican music; but with his *extended* family.

In the 8th grade play last week, "In the Heights", even though your characters were not related, you came together *like* family. Does that sound familiar, not when you're performing, but when you're just being who you are? *You* know how students here help each other, like with math. You look out for one another.

Charisse told me, "I'm going to remember the *family* I made here." Remember each other, and stay connected to each other.

You all just read Romeo and Juliet. **Fatima** said that you "... came to know not just what the words said but what the words meant." So you know the *feeling* behind a line that's fit for today, "Parting is such sweet sorrow."

And yet you're not truly parting if you take a part of EHS with you on to high school, and to life. And when you graduate you leave a piece of yourself here too that you're never going to forget. You'll never truly leave. As one graduate of the class of 2009, now a college junior, told me when he came back to EHS, "This is home."

And so even as you leave EHS, know that EHS will never leave you. Take the best of EHS with you, and be the best you can be.

In picturing the night sky, **Tonatiu** speaks of "an electricity", a "pulse", a "magic" in the light of the moon. But it's not *only* in the moon, whose light is reflected. It's also *here*, where each of you has started to give off your own light, more like the sun.

And so to each of you, and to all of you, congratulations on what you have achieved, and how you have achieved it. You go forward into the world brimming with promise. I wish you every success and happiness as you explore your future.

Thank you for letting me be the one to share this proud moment with you. And now, I'd like to ask the whole room to join me in a big, congratulatory cheer for the East Harlem School's very special Class of 2015!

Thank you.