Jim Andrews Graduation Speech – 2001 – Revised for 2007 based on political changes.

Introduction by Lesley Wall, Senior Class President:

When the class officers and I were deciding upon the graduation speaker in the fall of last year, we chose numerous equally qualified speakers who were all capable of ensuring a memorable graduation.

However, for us the choice became clear.

The keynote speaker tonight is someone whom many seniors have come to know and love at some point in their careers at Stafford.

He is highly regarded within the student body, not merely as a teacher, but also as a friend.

In January, we studied a poetry unit of various Shakespearean sonnets, including Sonnet 73. In this sonnet, Shakespeare uses the image of a glowing fire as a metaphor for life.

When the fire begins to fade, the ashes are left behind as a reminder of a life full of accomplishments. In explaining this sonnet to some confused seniors, he claimed that his ashes were the numerous students he had watched grow and mature to achieve great heights after high school.

I present to you the first faculty member ever to be chosen to speak at graduation, Mr. James Andrews.

The Speech:

Hi!

Nice to see you...though it's a little scary up here. I'd rather be in a classroom, though I'm not sure we could fit all of us in my classroom, so I guess we'll stay here for awhile.

and I used to be a kid who had nightmares for weeks before an oral report...though I think I've gotten over that a little bit.

The first part of a speech is supposed to be the greetings to everyone, starting with the people up on the stage..., so I'd like to say hi to all of the important people on the stage, in the audience, the prospective graduates, and the comfortable people in the nice cool quiet auditorium, where we all might wish we could be if the temperature gets over 80 and the speeches get too long. …I guess that's me…

 I also want to thank the kids who greatly honored me by asking me to give this speech, even though it took me a few minutes to get my breath after they did. […and I'm not sure I've gotten it back yet…] I hope I can get through this without making a complete fool of myself - or without saying too many politically incorrect things - or putting too many people to sleep...

After all, with 3000 people in the audience, I have a lot of chances to make somebody mad. If you'd like to debate any issues, go to my severely under-construction web site - jimteach.com, and e-mail me so we can have a nice argument if you want.

Therefore, I'd like to have a disclaimer right here. Anything that I say is NOT Mr. Pugh's fault. However, I do believe that he volunteered to put on his cowboy hat and sunglasses and sing "Born to be Wild" if I get scared and run off the stage.

Firstly, We're living at the most exciting time in history for people like Andrews who absolutely love gadgets, as anyone who looks at my room knows… It's full of gadgets. It has been an awesome thing to see all of the wonderful inventions which have made our lives so much easier and much more fun: With our computers we can INSTANTLY access almost any information we want over the internet. And then we have our cell phones, our ATMs, and thousands of neat gadgets being invented by the cartload, so we can do things much faster and much easier, giving us a lot more time either to smell the roses, OR, most likely, to find a lot more things to do faster and easier until we become even busier than we ever were before.

However, in the midst of our plenty, we also need to remember where our wonderful country came from, so that when you become leaders, you can have good examples to follow.

Even though we have recently been inundated with groups of professional whiners who want to sue everyone, smash things, and stifle thought and talk with that ultimate intolerance - political correctness, we might whine less if we could realize where we are and what we have:

We're the greatest place to live in the history of the world.

There's no place on earth that's like us - our United States...

where so many different people have learned to mostly get along,

and where there are so many opportunities to succeed.

 Back in the 1770's, in the middle of a big mess of European stupid customs and stupid wars, which have continued into the present, a bunch of folks an ocean away from Europe decided to break away from their Lords and Ladies and start a new country. Right around here, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and James Madison, with Yankees like Ben Franklin and John Adams, designed a country which they hoped could avoid the wars that had been going on for centuries in the old countries.

What did they design?              Us

What principle did they use?

Don't trust anybody with absolute power -

because, as the British historian Lord Acton aptly observed, "...absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Remember that!

Don't even trust English teachers with too much power.

They designed a system to keep future leaders from getting too strong:

A legislature, A president, and  a court system, with all of them going after each other in the healthiest way - with free debate - while sometimes managing to get some good things accomplished -

…with the most important piece of the equation being a bunch of us ordinary people who can vote out the rascals whenever we want if they start letting  power go to their heads.

We have a country where almost anyone with ability, training, and guts, not too many bad habits, and who sometimes uses deodorant, can get a job and move far beyond where most of the Billions of people in the world can even dream of going.

…The deodorant is the important part…

2. I hope you'll excuse me for being a little depressing on your graduation night, but This section could be called “Stupid Leaders.”

Even though we're sitting here in the United States…and we're nice and comfortable, and we can do almost anything we want, go wherever we want, buy whatever we want, at least with credit cards, most places in the world are not that nice…

…so, Andrews, why bring it up…

because you are going to be the leaders…you are the people are going to go out there and take care of this stuff, after all of us baby boomers have retired…  [Of course you'll be paying for us too…]

Most of the problems of the world are not caused by the ordinary people, who would most often be satisfied to be left alone, but by their Stupid Leaders who have learned to stir up their people to get more money and maintain power.

This is worth mentioning mainly because we older folks are going to leave these rotten apples for you younger leaders to deal with - hopefully with more smarts than we have sometimes used.

As George Santayana said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." - or in this case not just the past, but the present as well.

And as the crazy King Lear said to the crying, blinded Gloucester, "When we are born we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools."

And that's why babies cry, in case you didn't know.

 In the Middle East, people are fighting and killing each other as they have been doing for the nearly 4000 years since Abraham of Ur had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, whose kids are still fighting 4000 years later.

[Updated] In the Balkans, where my Marine son was stationed, they're still trying to kill each other off. We sent over troops to help victims in Kosovo, giving them almost a whole country.  But almost immediately, the stupid leaders we saved from destruction picked up their guns and crossed the border into Macedonia, where they're trying to mess up yet another country.

Then my son went to Iraq, flying his little Pioneer UAV from the roads and the sands in front of the First Marine Expeditionary Corps as they fought their way from town to town until they got to Baghdad to rid the Iraqis of Saddam.

However, it was not possible to get rid of the Middle East’s seemingly unlimited supply of stupid leaders, who have rewarded our efforts by trying to kill each other off by the hundreds of thousands, just like Saddam did. We could have just left him in place to achieve the same result that the stupid leaders are doing to each other.

Dedicated to the proposition that the 7th Century is the greatest, and that the norms, attitudes and laws of that barbaric time should be inflicted upon the men and women of the modern world, the mullahs encourage their children to kill each other off based on disagreements over who was going to replace Mohammed some 1400 years ago.

And in Rwanda, the Stupid Hutu tribal leaders murdered 800,000 Tutsis, were defeated by the remaining Tutsis and now the whole area of the continent is teeming with bloodthirsty soldiers, including lots of little kids, running around with guns, shooting and killing people.  And I just read that in the neighboring country of Burundi, they're getting ready to do it again.

In China the stupid leaders arrest, imprison, and kill almost anybody who disagrees with them, such as harmless Falun Gong members whose dangerous philosophy is mainly to do their morning exercises in the town square.

In Afghanistan the Stupid Taliban leaders made it illegal for women to do anything except hide behind their veils and obey their men, and made people of other religions wear distinctive clothing ...like Adolf Hitler used to do. They have been temporarily defeated, but are still trying hard to bring their warped idea of the perfect society back to the country.

If you had been in North Korea for the last ten years or so, you might be getting instructions over the radio as to how to prepare grass to keep from starving…just because the stupid North Korean leaders want war, they want guns, and they want armies. They want everything but food, as between 3 and 4 million people have starved to death in North Korea since 1995.

And the folks who practice the main American religion are fair game for persecution almost anywhere in the world –

as people practicing or changing religions of any sort, as we do all the time here, are likely to be ostracized, imprisoned, killed, or, in Sudan, sold as slaves.

Our country has largely overcome such vehement hatreds, but we now seem to encourage some immigrants, instead of embracing our core culture, to practice their their barbaric customs here - with the support of the politically correct who hold that all cultures are equally workable.

And as I'm giving this speech, more than 400 people around the world will starve to death, mostly because of their Stupid Leaders.

And so, even though we have a wonderful country, and even though you are wonderful people, we're sending you out there into the world to try to take care of this stuff, mainly because lots of those crazy leaders are trying their best to get nukes.

And you, my beloved students, as leaders of the future, must decide what types of leaders you will follow…

But here, at Stafford High, as I stand in the halls and watch the wonderfully interesting faces going by, I see people from all over the world, of all colors, from all backgrounds - becoming friends. People who would have been taught to hate and kill each other on the other side of the world - women who would have no rights on the other side of the world - are walking and talking openly, and dressing the way they want, and don't have to worry about the mutilation and exploitation and poverty they would experience in countries with Stupid Leaders

That's why we have such a great country.

And even in our country we have stupid leaders, mainly in the media, some of whom would sell out the children of America in a minute so they can make more money. When people ask me what has changed in the 35 years since I've been teaching, I'd have to say, Not much." I've always had kids who have tried to do a good job (with a little nudge from their teachers), and a few students that we have to push a little harder.

And you parents who were once slightly wild teenagers need to remember, as I remember, the stuff you got into back then. As I’ve been teaching for 41 years, I know the stories. Be nice to me! But in spite of what they have done, most kids grow up to be responsible adults and loving parents.

I can still remember a student…I don't think he's here tonight…who hated me, who wanted to kill me, who wanted to go out to the parking lot and fight me…and everything else, and so he graduated, and twenty years later, I'm driving up the highway toward Stafford, and right in front of Drew Middle School, and I look over at a car that's going by me on the right, and I see this same guy who hated my guts twenty years before. And I looked at him, and he looked at me. And I looked at him, and he looked at me…and we pulled over and we hugged… and…"Hey! This is really great!"  Because he'd grown up. He'd gone out into the world. He'd gotten a job. He had some problems. He came out of it, and he comes to basketball games all the time now and harasses his old teacher, with whom he can now be friends.

Again, even though some parents think that their students will never grow up, they all grow up, and almost everybody turns out OK.

However, within the last few years I have seen a change in the society that makes me a little worried about the future - as the Stupid Media leaders give us games, TV programs, music, and movies that have become more and more violent, and more and more degrading, especially to women.

As they keep pushing the edge, and as we all get more jaded, the edge gets farther and farther down in the mud...

Some of the more violent games make my son's Marine Combat training pale by comparison, and the lessons our little sisters can get from some music videos can easily be duplicated in the disease-ridden red light districts of big cities.

We are the first generation to regularly expose our smallest children to stuff that can take away their childhood and mess up their minds. As we let our media leaders teach our children...for money, we teachers are starting to see the results.

We can't really stop the junk that's pouring into our environment.

However, while we can't stop the birds from landing in our hair,

we don't have to let them build nests there.

If we wouldn't want our little sisters to be see it, or our little sisters to be like that,

we can just turn it off…and read a good book...

or at least that's what English teachers would say.

As you go out to become the next leaders, it might not hurt to think about some of the things that we can choose to do to make our world and ourselves the best that we can be.

When that well-known politically-incorrect activist named Jesus was asked to pick the greatest commandment,

in addition to the religious admonition to love God with all their hearts and souls and minds,

he added that little number that all of us, religious or not, need to remember -

to love our neighbors as ourselves.

If we can learn to reach out to people in need,

in our country and around the world (giving to organizations like World Vision, Feed the Children, Catholic Relief Services, or Doctors without Borders instead of the stupid leaders who will only use the money for their palaces), we will quickly find out that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." - as we experience  "the healing power of doing good," as a recent book was entitled.

It's great to do good. It's great to help people.

One of the most rewarding things about writing recommendations, as lots of kids come to their senior English teachers and want them to write recommendations for college is to see all the stuff our students are doing to make the world better – as volunteers at hospitals, and volunteers at homeless shelters, and volunteers wherever help is needed for those who are needy. And in many cases these are the students who are the most busy, who are in sports, and in school activities, and doing Andrews' horrendous, endless themes, and all sorts of other things. And yet they're still doing all of these things for people. They've discovered the wonderful rewards of helping other people...”the healing power of doing good...”

And as for the rest of the world, whose stupid leaders have been encouraging their followers to kill for so long, you new leaders need to help them to realize that there is no solution to their fighting other than forgiveness.

That may sound a little silly; it may sound a little simplistic, but what else can stop people who have been fighting for 4000 years?

Some of the worst atrocities were committed in South Africa under the apartheid regime, but there was one real leader, Nelson Mandela, who had been in prison for 28 years… He had been tortured, and beaten, and kept in prison for 28 years. But after 28 years, he came out of that prison and did a very unusual thing in the modern world. He put aside any bitterness and hatred that he had, and convinced the leaders of his country that the killing had to stop on both sides.

They set up a Truth Commission where the horrors would be confessed,

but forgiveness would be the remedy.

The people would stop killing each other over the past.

And so South Africa actually has hope to stop the never-ending circle of violence.

In spite of the bad examples around the world, I'm happy to report to you parents that the kids of Stafford High School are alive and well. You are some of the neatest kids I have even had the honor of teaching and knowing. That's why I still love teaching after 41 years.

Where else could I get to know 125 new people every year,

---and get to constantly run into some of the 5 or 6 thousand people I have taught over the years. Teaching is Great, if you ever want to be one…

I've also been wonderfully impressed with the dedication to excellence and the high personal standards of so many that I've taught, and I'd like to thank the parents for trusting this sometimes sloppy and eccentric English teacher to work with the minds of your children.

It's been neat getting to know them, and, hopefully, to help them develop skills that will make their next steps toward grownuphood [if there is such a word] a little easier.

May the Lord bless...

I Love you a lot...  Keep in touch…

Thanks...