

Maria Ayerdi-Kaplan Wallenberg HS Commencement Address 2014

Good Afternoon.

Principle Foster, faculty, parents and students. It is an honor to be here today. Thank you Jemeshia for that wonderful introduction and for inviting me to speak. I am so proud of the Raul Wallenberg High School Class of 2014! Congratulations! And congratulations to the parents, faculty, and administration who inspired, guided, and supported you during your years at Raul Wallenberg. Students, please take this moment to thank your teachers, school administrators, and parents with a round of applause.

I am so very pleased to be part of this celebration; one that is practiced throughout the country. And for good reason. It is a special time not only to reflect on the past four years, but perhaps more importantly it is an opportunity for you graduates to look to the future, explore the next important stages in your life and how you fit into the World. What are your expectations for yourself? What expectations do your family, friends, and community have of you?

As you will hear from me today, I encourage you to engage the world, be bold, take risks, take responsibility, be kind and fair and always fight for what you believe is right.

As teenagers and students, it is natural for you to be focused inward. When I was your age, it was hard for me to see beyond my daily routine, my problems, and my desires, to give much attention to a larger context—my family, my community, or my country. As you move on to the next phase of your life, whether it will be higher education or the workplace, or some other endeavor, the best advice I can give you is that you increasingly look outward, that you engage with your community and the World at large.

What do I mean by “engage?” To engage means “to participate or become involved in.” There is a tendency at times to emphasize the individual, to view self-reliance as a paramount virtue, to see the individual as independent of, and not engaged with, the community. Some have described this belief as “radical individualism.” President Obama has referred to it as the culture of “you’re on your own.” My message to you today is that you are more likely to find fulfillment in life if you resist this trend, and instead pursue engagement with others. In this globalized World, we are more connected than ever. We are interdependent. We are the keepers of our brothers and sisters. And we are only as strong as what we have in common.

In a recent New York Times article, David Brooks reports that the younger generation is more interested than mine in being well-off financially. Polling of young adults shows that philosophy of life is less important than economic success, and empathy is down. Perhaps these trends have something to do with a more Darwinian, or survival-of-the-fittest job market, as Brooks put it.

But is professional and financial success the key to happiness and fulfillment? Studies show that people who help others, who invest in their community, are happier than those who pursue only personal economic gain. The evidence clearly establishes that someone of moderate means who takes responsibility for his or her community and engages in public service is more fulfilled, less anxious, healthier, and happier than a person of great wealth who is not involved in advancing the interests of the community.

Engagement with others is also a form of kindness. In her book, *Everyday Kindness: Shortcuts to a Happier and More Confident Life*, Stephanie Dowrick says that “taking kindness as a privilege and a responsibility would create a safer, friendlier and far more appreciative world,” and “being kind to ourselves is necessary so that we can better care for ourselves. When we care for ourselves, we are better equipped to care for others.” So do for yourself; do for others. Engage, be involved.

We can take different routes to engagement. Here’s how my involvement in my community began. Prior to my work on the Transbay Project, I was in-house counsel for a shipping company in the Bay Area. Unfortunately they were moving my job out of the state. Because I had a young child, I could not move. I also wanted to do something to make a difference. I wanted to take more responsibility for making my community work and work well.

I decided that the best person to help me was the most powerful person in San Francisco at the time, Mayor Brown. Mayor Brown had a program called “open door day.” Any citizen with a ticket could meet with him on a Saturday morning to discuss their concerns.

To receive one of the few tickets handed out, I had to stand in line at 2 am, on a rainy night, to get a ticket by 7 am when the doors opened. I met with the Mayor the following Saturday to ask for a job. He told me the City was not hiring in my field. Not taking no for an answer ever, I said “well Mr. Mayor, you can make me Deputy Mayor. Here is my resume; let me tell you my story.” He liked my perseverance and offered me a job. This meeting was risky, bold, and an

important step in what would become a long-term commitment to making a positive difference in the world.

The Transbay Project was one of my first assignments. No one thought this project would ever get off the ground because it had been studied and debated since the 1950's. Well, I made it happen because I engaged. I knocked on doors again and again. I persuaded people to join me in selling the dream, never giving up. It wasn't easy. I was working in the fields of transportation, construction and real estate development, where there are still few women today. Undeterred, I learned everything I could about public transit, public finance, architecture, development, and construction. I took the project on the road, raised money, hired good people, convinced lawmakers to support the project, and fought against everyone and everything that stood in the way. I believed in the Project. I visualized the Project completed.

And the result . . . Today the \$4.5 billion Transbay Transit Center Project is under construction in downtown San Francisco and has created thousands of jobs across the United States and Bay Area, hired disabled veterans, helped small businesses, minority communities, and when completed will improve our environment, air quality and provide new homes and a new neighborhood with parks and art. The new station will combine 11 different transportation systems under a single roof, including Muni, BART, AC Transit, Caltrain, and future High Speed Rail. It includes a bus ramp to the Bay Bridge and a tunnel for the trains coming from the Peninsula and Southern California. The project will create more than 4,500 new housing units, many of which will be affordable. The new Transbay neighborhood will be pedestrian and bike friendly. People will live and work close to mass transit, employment, retail, parks, schools, and

public art. I brought the Transbay Project from an idea to reality because I decided to become involved with my community in a meaningful and direct way.

My colleagues at the Transbay Project and I do what we do because hoping that society will meet the social, political, and economic challenges of the 21st Century is not enough. To solve social problems, we must take ownership of those problems. They affect the health, safety, and welfare of our community; we take responsibility for solutions.

Let me provide one example as to how you can get involved. The effects of human-induced climate change are being felt everywhere in the United States, including California. Due to climate change, Californians are facing drought, crop loss; more frequent and severe heat waves, wildfires and forest death; and sea level rise that threatens places such as Ocean Beach and the San Francisco and Oakland Airports. A report released this month by more than 300 U.S. scientists warned that “Climate change, once considered an issue for a distant future, has moved firmly into the present.” The longer we wait to begin dramatic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, the greater the costs your generation will confront to address the impacts of climate change. We can’t afford to wait for the day when everyone is fully engaged in this issue.

It is not with a sense of doom, however, that I suggest that you may want to engage with this issue today, but with optimism that your generation will take ownership of issues like climate change that directly affect your lives. As one climate scientist said, “We have to find the flexibility, the courage and the determination to stand up to that crisis – collectively, not just as individuals.” I believe that together—your generation and mine—we can find that courage and determination. And that requires that you become involved. Write to elected officials. Vote.

Volunteer with organizations. Speak out in whatever way you choose, and your voice will be heard.

Let me give you another example of a potential avenue for you to become involved. Our society is more economically polarized than ever. This imbalance in wealth and power threatens the American ideals of equality and democracy. At the same time, we need democracy more than ever to address our environmental and other social problems. Your active involvement in your community could help to restore fairness to our political system.

We see examples of radical individualism every day in the increasing attacks on our government as separate from ourselves and the enemy of individual freedom. In fact, it is **our** government and its job is to serve us. To see the government as “the other” is to deny that our government is what we all make it. Democracy is hard. It requires work to prevent its subversion by powerful economic interests. To have a government that serves people, we need to be involved – all of us. We cannot sit back and let others direct the government. We must do it ourselves or face the perils that come from being disengaged from our democracy.

These are just a few examples of matters that deserve your engagement. There are countless other opportunities that already exist, and ones that you can create.

To the graduating students here today, you may find the prospect of taking more responsibility for the welfare of your community rather daunting. That is natural. But I want to ask you a question. Do you sometimes think that you would have liked high school a bit more if, during

the odyssey you just completed, you knew what you know now? I have news for you: everyone feels that way. Experiencing something for the first time, without knowing how it will turn out, is the very spice of life. It's like an exciting movie or novel. It can be frightening to operate on the edge of your confidence level. But that's where growth happens. With the help of your family, friends, and teachers, you embraced your high school experience. You all probably faced some stiff headwinds at various times, but you persevered and made it through.

You have met not only the requirements for your high school diploma—you know a lot of facts, formulas, and foreign languages—but more important, you learned how to learn. That skill will apply to everything you do in life, and will help you to become involved in larger issues than yourself. That you are here today means that you have the ability to engage the World. You have learned how to put in the mental work required to figure things out. Your education here provides you with a good reason to believe in yourself. Relax with the confidence that you know how to work hard, pursue new knowledge, and take ownership of your destiny.

As Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho once said, “Remember your dreams and fight for them. You must know what you want from life. There is just one thing that makes your dream become impossible: the fear of failure. Never forget your personal legend. Never forget your dreams. Your silent heart will guide you. It is the possibility of a dream that makes life interesting. You can choose between being a victim of destiny or an adventurer who is fighting for something important.”

And there is no more compelling example of the virtues of engagement than your very own high school, Raul Wallenberg. You all know how your school took its name. Raul Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat who, while serving in Hungary during World War II, saved tens of thousands of Jewish people from extermination by Hungarian Fascists and Nazis, for which he eventually lost his life in a Soviet prison. Raul Wallenberg was a mensch, a righteous man, which, in the Jewish tradition, is the very highest compliment.

Raul Wallenberg is an international symbol of engagement. You must be very proud to graduate from this High School. As graduates, I hope that you will all strive to carry forward the tradition of your alma mater to make a better World.

So class of 2014 get out there, get involved, get engaged, and fight for something important.

Best wishes!