

The 2013 National Honor Society Keynote Address

(I was asked by NHS Sponsor Adrienne Johnson to Present to Parents, Faculty, and Students)

Good Afternoon Everyone,

Before I begin, I'd like to thank Mrs. Johnson for asking me to speak today. I certainly didn't expect to be asked to speak. I'm about as good at giving speeches as the Germans were at winning world wars in the 20th century. I've been saving that joke for two years!! The last two years, we had German foreign exchange students, Markus and Richie, so I couldn't say that. This year I showed up to school in August, I saw Maut, and I said, "Maut!! Where ya from?" She said, "The Netherlands", so I knew, this year, that I'd be safe.

First, I wanted to speak to those students who applied to NHS this year but did not get in. I think that any time you apply for something, and you submit your credentials for others to evaluate, that you make yourself a bit vulnerable, and when your application is rejected, it can be difficult not to take that rejection personally. But I hope that those of you who did not get in this year do not take a negative view of NHS, as some students have done in the past. I'll use the following analogy. We know that some athletes have to work a year or two years longer than others before they get to play or start on a varsity team. In the same way, some students have to work a year or two years longer before they get in to NHS. So my advice is to re-apply again next year. If you re-apply with a positive attitude, that in and of itself will impress the teachers who evaluate the applications. And one other thing: Teachers can be wrong, and maybe we got it wrong this year in your case. That's definitely happened before, and it's happened to some pretty famous people. A teacher once said of Beethoven--when Beethoven was young--that "as a composer, he was hopeless." Walt Disney was once fired from a newspaper for a "lack of creativity." And Dr. Seuss's first book was rejected by 27 publishers before the 28th published it. And, oh yeah, sold 6 million copies. You get the idea. So don't let your disappointment today keep you from re-applying next year.

Now, for the 3 students who did get in, congratulations. I'm going to do two things today. First, I want to share with you a quote that I believe fits this induction ceremony, perfectly. This quote is from Socrates, an ancient philosopher who lived in the city-state of Athens in Greece. I'm going to read Socrates' quote twice, so that everyone can really process it, and understand it. Here's what Socrates said: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit."

I'll read it again: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit." What Socrates meant was this: A single act can be great, it can be noble, it can be heroic, it can be a lot of things, but Socrates did NOT use the word "excellence" to describe a single act. He used the word "excellence" to describe, a habit. Meaning, a multitude of acts, a track record of acts, performed each day, each week, each month, and each year. Socrates' statement that "We are what we repeatedly do," means that we are NOT defined by any one thing we do, but by what we do each day and throughout our lives.

I love that quote today, because each of you being admitted into NHS are not being admitted on the basis of a single act, but by a track record of excellence in school, in sports, in music, in art, in leadership, and in your community. You are being accepted because your teachers and coaches have seen excellence from you. Excellence as Socrates would have defined it. So again, from me, and from everyone here, congratulations.

But, I also have a challenge to deliver to you today. Before I do, I need to teach a bit of history first, because you need to know about Athens, where Socrates lived. The amazing thing about Athens was that its peak population was only 40,000-50,000 people. So, ancient Athens was not much larger than Kearney is today. Not very big. And yet, Athens by itself produced four of the greatest thinkers in world history. Athens was home to Socrates, whom I just quoted, but it was also home to the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and to the doctor Hippocrates, who was one of the first people in world history to believe that disease was caused by natural, scientific factors. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are still read and studied in universities today.

So, how was it possible for a city-state of 50,000 people to produce four of the greatest thinkers in ancient history? Was it just luck? Was it just coincidence? I posed this question to my sophomores this year in world history, and one student, Jon Snider, gave the answer that I would have given. Jon's answer, although he didn't use this exact word, was culture. And it's the

importance of culture that the rest of my speech is about. I'm going to say the word culture so many times in the next few minutes that it might be the only thing you remember me saying. That's ok, because that's what I want you to remember.

Culture is the environment that surrounds the people living in a society, or working within a school, or playing on a team. Culture is what's in the air in a school or community. Culture conditions people within a school to think a certain way and to act a certain way. Which brings me to Athens. Athens produced so many great thinkers because Athens got the culture right, as Jon had said.

How did Athens get its culture right? Here's what Athens did. Athens created democracy, meaning that the Athenians were the first people in history to believe that everyday, ordinary people should participate fully in their own government. So by creating democracy, the Athenians opened their society to include more people as thinkers and as voters. In doing so, they created a culture that empowered people to think for themselves, a culture that encouraged people to pursue knowledge because people knew they would have opportunities to display it.

Socrates, Hippocrates, Plato, Aristotle, they all thrived within Athens because the culture there encouraged them to think. Therefore, the lesson of ancient Athens is that culture is critical. I try to teach my students that the reason why history is always relevant is because the lessons laid down by previous generations, no matter how long ago, those lessons don't go away. The same lessons can be applied to ourselves, today.

Right now, we can apply the lessons of ancient Athens to this school, and to our students, because even today, the best teams, the best companies, the best schools become the best, by doing what Athens did. They create a culture that brings the best out of people.

So, I'd like to ask the NHS students, what do you want Maywood's school culture to be? A school or a team can do things to create a culture that they want. You can choose culture. I will use the girl's basketball team as a mini-example, because I think that Coach Stengel does some of this. Doing things like pre-game meditation and having players speak to the team before practice or at the end of practice, those things are intended to create a culture that is team-centered and is uplifting. Not just for the main players, but for everyone. And each year, Kim does something new. This year, Robyn Johnston gave some motivational talks to the team each Tuesday or Wednesday. So again, you can create your own culture if you try.

And my message today is, NHS students need to do their part in creating and improving the culture here at Maywood. You have a greater responsibility than other students to be culture-creators, because it's the attitude of the best students that filters through to the others. So for example, how do you react when Mr. Kinnison announces that you will have a Monday test in science class coming off of a weekend? I'm not saying I know how you'd react, but suppose that the students in the class, especially the NHS students, complain about having a Monday test. I hope you can see how complaining would affect culture. Or, on the flip side, how not complaining would affect culture. How do you react when a coach has you run hard sprints at the end of a practice? Do you run the sprints at 80%, just fast enough to get them done? Or, do you run them all-out, in order to set the right example for your teammates and influence the culture the right way?

How do you approach your class scheduling for next school year? Do you look mostly for classes that you know you will like? Or are you willing to take a hard math or science class in order to challenge yourself? I don't want to embarrass Quinton Phillips here, but let me single Quinton out for a moment, because, even though he doesn't have a perfect academic record, I know he's currently taking physics and chemistry. That's a tough combination, but he chose to do it, and he's done well. Maybe there are other students who should follow his example. And then, if enough students follow his example, you get a new element to your school culture that starts to form.

What kind of books do you check out from the library? Have you ever chosen a book because it looks hard? Or because you know it's a classic novel written by a great author?

Finally, what do you do in the summer? Many of you work, and that's great. I joke all the time with Cassie Votaw, CEO of Metal Petals, about how she's going to be a millionaire some day because she's has the potential to establish a long-term business. But, do the rest of you use some of your summer to read books, to practice an instrument, to lift weights, to run so

that you can become a better student-athlete for the coming year? How many books did you read last summer? How many free throws did you shoot? How many miles did you run? More of you, more Maywood students, need to be able to answer questions like these.

How you answer questions like these determines your school's culture. When you raise your standards, you influence other students to do the same. But if you settle for standards that are beneath your best, you'll create a culture in which mediocrity becomes acceptable, and a culture in which mediocrity becomes confused with excellence.

Don't let that happen. Help build a culture here at Maywood that does for your classmates what the culture in Athens did for Socrates. How do you do it? How does one person contribute to culture? The answer is that there are a lot of ways. I'll give you two. One way is to act on the following quote. This is a quote that I give to all of the cross country runners. It's on the inside of their binders that they get when they start running. Here's the quote: "Successful people do the things that other people don't want to do." Yeah? "Successful people do the things that other people don't want to do." You can influence culture by doing the types of things that the average person doesn't want to do. The quote doesn't mean that successful people always like doing things that other people don't want to do. But they subordinate their dislike to their desire to be excellent. How can you apply that quote to yourself? Maybe it means taking an extra 30-minutes to edit the essay you wrote in English class so that you don't miss points for spelling, or punctuation, or grammar.

The second way to influence culture is, if you know somebody, student, athlete, parent, teacher, coach, administrator, who is doing something right now to improve the culture at Maywood, tell them that you know that they're doing it and that you value it. Because things that get recognized and rewarded get repeated. I see what Mrs. Bauer has done with Teammates. I see how good our pre-school is. I saw that the FFA teams did well at State a few weeks ago. I think it was cool that Mr. Kennedy had students work on the garage next to his house. I don't mean to leave anyone out, those are just examples. But the point is, it adds to the culture at a school when people are acknowledged for what they've done. Things that get recognized and rewarded get repeated. And as Socrates said, "We are what we repeatedly do."

So in conclusion, I congratulate the new NHS students today, but I challenge the NHS students to think about culture, to realize that what you do individually and how you do it affects other people here at Maywood, because we all exist within the same school culture. Athens shows us that culture has the power to transform a place from being merely good or decent, to a place that is truly great and historic, as Athens itself was.

Thank You.