

{This may not be verbatim. I tend to ad lib a lot.}

Commencement Speech for the 8th Grade
2005-2006 School Year
June 8, 2006
by Roxanne Eckenrode

Greetings and congratulations to Virgin Islands Montessori School's graduating 8th Graders!
Congratulations also to the Third Years in the 9-12 Class. Greetings to everyone present.
{Please pardon the breach in St. Thomas etiquette here of not listing all platform guests, but I know Ms. McWeeney will have already done this. Why be repetitive?} Thank you for being here today.

You poor 8th Graders, you have all this *stuff* in your heads right now. We older people have had the same beautiful human thoughts and feelings, mischievous ideas, and even fears. Yes, even that mischievous thought you're thinking of right now. We wish we knew then what we know now, and we wish we could somehow impart it all to you to let you know that everything will be okay. 'But, you won't believe us or understand us, and you'll worry in vain as we did and you too will make mistakes, but the whole process will nonetheless be very beautiful and very human.

When I was in high school, after some huge percentage of my time and energy was sucked up by thinking about social things and *then* school, what was left to think about my future career happened to center around plans to teach math. Most of my friends had not picked out a career and the few that did pretty much were not contemplating ones that they would later actually have. In terms of career I almost only thought about teaching math, but even with this unusually early direction, my professional years have not all been spent teaching. I've worked in a myriad of other areas including software design, technical support, and even sales. 'And to be honest, I don't know if some other career areas still lie ahead. I spent so much time dreaming within the world I knew. Today many adults change careers multiple times. 'So, how do we prepare for the likely possibility of multiple careers? One way is to follow our passions while staying open to a range of possibilities.

Are you dreaming of going to a particular university? Are you wondering what you can do during high school to impress them to admit you or even to give you money? **ASK THEM.** Your unique academic and personal qualities can open many doors, and coming from a remote part of the Nation with a small population can give you an additional advantage. You won't know unless you ask.

Go directly to your sources.

Fantasizing about being an architect? A lawyer? A social worker? **FOLLOW ONE.** Ask him or her if you can conduct an interview or follow them around for a day.

'Thinking you might someday want to learn more about chemistry? History? Math? Pick up a book, and start reading it.

What are you waiting for?

‘Want to learn a foreign language?’ Visit a place where they speak it. Pick up a CD.

You don’t have to wait for an outside person to introduce you to an opportunity. You don’t have to limit yourself to learning some part of a subject picked by someone else. If you are interesting in something – or even think you’re interested in something – why wait? You might be waiting a very long time. ‘Maybe forever. You can *choose* to take the wheel and drive toward your passions in the same way that you can choose to show patience and love rather than to turn to pessimistic default settings.

I thought my job in high school was to get decent, even good, grades. Don’t set your goal to only do as well or better than the person who happens to be sitting next to you or to please your teacher. Be more interested in learning than in grades. If you focus on the learning, the mastery, the grades will follow, and you’ll enjoy the journey. If I could go back I’d read more books, especially textbooks, just for myself. I’d do more observing and interning, take more workshops and summer classes, both in areas that I wanted to pursue and even in others that I didn’t. How else will you know for sure that there is not some underlying additional passion waiting to be uncovered? When else will you have so much time and freedom to do so? Things fit together, sometimes in planned ways and sometimes in unexpected ones. If you don’t already type quickly, for instance, I highly recommend you learn with a class or Mavis Beacon software. I was repeatedly advised in school that typing was not a class for someone like me who was in an academic track, but it’s a skill that can make college a lot easier when it comes time for many, many papers. Sometimes it’s good to follow your instinct and interest into a place that’s use is unclear at the time. These things make us interesting. Steve Jobs found out that his curious early pursuit of a class on calligraphy simply because it was beautiful and historic became very useful many years later when designing Apple Computers.

WORRY LESS WHAT OTHERS THINK. I see some early advances by you, our 8th Graders, in this area already. Sometimes you *clearly* aren’t worried about what others think! ☺ No, seriously, I sincerely think one of the many ways our current 8th Graders have made us proud this year is by further developing their abilities to appreciate their own individuality. Later you’ll laugh at how much time was needlessly wasted worrying about what others thought. You’ll find your former preoccupation with pride and vanity to be hilarious. In high school I spent too much time hoping to please friends or the boy I found most interesting at that moment. The people I met in high school that I choose to know and love today didn’t need any impressing.

I asked earlier “What are you waiting for?” This also goes for art. If you’re thinking of creating art, do it. Create it for yourself or for people you love. If it’s for yourself, keep it. Write, draw, dance, make music . . . whatever ignites your heart. Make something. The hardest part is getting started. Try to get it published or displayed. You can even publish it yourself for free at places like lulu.com. {Spell “lulu”}

When I was in high school I imagined that at some later point I’d settle into a niche and stay there and almost stop needing to grow. That’s not how it works though. Search for what you love and remember to cherish the search, because it’s never entirely over as long as you are

breathing, and that's a good thing. As John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans." Along the way, ask yourself what those things are that you want. The only way to get them is to know what they are. They don't have to fit into someone else's preconceived notion of what's available, and they don't have to be what you've already seen. They just need to be true to your values and desires.

You've had excellent models in the middle school and throughout your earlier education regarding study skills. Use them. There's a story of a farmer who is offered free assistance by the government to be a better farmer. He declines, asking why he should take a class on how to become a better farmer when he's already not as good of a farmer as he knows how to be. You know how to 'farm' well, how to put what you know to use, and, more importantly, how to keep getting better. 8th Graders, we can't wait to see what you grow!

(Thank you.)