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Parents, Faculty, Guests, and the Class of 2022 - Congratulations. If you are here today you undoubtedly played a role in guiding at least one of the 385 students sitting in front of me past 13 years of quizzes, tests, assignments, projects, and papers. It has been four years with a global pandemic in the middle, but we made it. And I promise, that is the last time I will mention COVID because I wholeheartedly believe that our high school experience and our class is not defined by disruption and sickness but rather steadfast optimism and a desire to overcome. Now, I apologize if you aren't a fan of the biological sciences but I have to take this opportunity to share a lesson from this past year. I guess the words on the page of my unit 8 ecology study guide spoke to me, and for the very first time, I was excited about the opportunity to use my biology knowledge.

Let's talk about animals, more specifically habitats and a funny-sounding word called a niche. Ecologically, a niche describes the role of an organism in a community. It encapsulates the physical and environmental conditions as well as the interactions it has with other species. No two species have the same niche, necessitating adaptation to the flow of constant changes. Each person, whether they realize it or not, has built and adapted their niche yet still we share many common experiences. We all read *Of Mice and Men* and *The Iliad* and *The Great Gatsby*, at least we were all supposed to. We all know about the mitochondria being the powerhouse of the cell, possibly more from memes than from class.

And more seriously, we all had assessments that shook us to our core, the ones that you couldn't help but be upset about as you walked out of a classroom and blankly stared into the hallway. My most devastating one happened to be for the push-up test in tenth grade, luckily I literally cannot do worse next time....

We also built our own, smaller communities, from our clubs, to our sports teams, to even just your desk neighbors. And I can give a few examples. The RHS mock trial team, a team of individuals scouring over pages of case law, though our conversations mostly surrounded college applications, politics, and pretty much anything but mock trial at times. The basketball teams have mastered their intricate plays, while us fans have mastered celebrating after each championship. And even smaller and more random, my 10th grade chemistry lab table where we discussed the lives of stars, experimented with titrations, and built friendships that extended beyond the classroom. Ranging from social to academic to extracurriculars we all found our niche. I could rattle on for hours naming every group and every accomplishment everyone in the seats before me has had.

But that is not my point. In a minute here our class president and friend Molly Lyons is going to direct us to turn our tassels. This is the signal that our high school years are over, that we have passed the first of many stages of learning to come in our life. And unfortunately, that niche, that comfort zone, will be challenged and pushed towards adaptation and growth. Yes, you will maintain

relationships with the many people you found pivotal. Yes, in 20 years we will all be at a reunion in the Lounsbury House, eating cheese and cringing at our senior quotes. Yes, Ridgefield will always be our hometown, but never will we return back to the same niche that we leave behind today. It sounds scary at first. I will be the first to admit comfortability in my comfort zone, finding solace in my routine. Anyone close to me knows that my phone is on Do Not Disturb by 9:45pm every night, pushing towards 10 on a late night if Stranger Things is on a cliffhanger.

So the thought of leaving our accustomed schedules frightens me too but we have practiced the art of becoming comfortable in the uncomfortable. This ability to adapt will serve us throughout the duration of our lifetime. If it provides any consolation, species have been doing this for billions of years, changing, surviving, and growing, and you probably will not be the first one to end this phenomenon. Even if it is unnerving at first, jump into whatever you do with complete devotion, challenge yourself, and take risks, because as daunting as leaving your niche may seem, there are a myriad of opportunities outside these doors. As Survivor show host Jeff Probst says, “this challenge is on.”

I think what I have truly learned is that the education process is sinusoidal and upward sloping in nature. There will be peaks and there will be valleys and I look

forward to us learning from our mistakes, being invigorated by our challenges,  
and succeeding in the face of adversity. Congratulations Class of 2022.