

## THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

### KEYNOTE ADDRESS

JUNE 6, 2010

When I was asked to give this address today, which I consider a real honor, I of course wanted to do it well. So I did a little research on great “addresses.” And there is probably none more famous than Abe Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Looking into it, I was surprised to learn that Lincoln’s famous speech, beginning with the immortal phrase, “Four score and seven years ago...” lasted just **two minutes**. I thought...despite how much I badger the students to tighten their writing and not just drone on...I’m gonna need more than two minutes. But then I learned that Lincoln’s speech in Gettysburg was **NOT** the keynote speech that day. Someone else gave that—a politician named Edward Everett. *He* spoke for **two hours!** I thought about that and came to the obvious conclusion. Since no one remembers anything Mr. Everett said in those two hours (or that he spoke at all) but, nearly 150 years later, Honest Abe’s two-minutes’ worth of words are still considered one of the greatest speeches in American history, I’m going to try to keep this speech a lot closer to two minutes than two hours. (*Larry and CJ are down here right now looking at each other, like, “Thank God!”*)

A couple years ago, on a beautiful April day, I walked into the school building that stands over here at the corner of Huntingdon Avenue & 30<sup>th</sup> Street. I assumed the door would open into a little entranceway of some kind from which I could *quietly* indicate that I was *hoping* to meet *briefly* with the fellow who ran the school—a gentleman named

Tom Culotta. Of course, when I opened the door, sixteen sets of eyes immediately turned toward me, as I found myself standing—rather awkwardly—in the classroom. (My wife, Sande, who had told me about the school, failed to warn me that my entry would be so abrupt.) As I stood there, unsure if I'd be treated with indifference or antagonism, a curious thing happened. The whole class, almost in unison, said, “Hey! Come on in.” It was my *first indication* that this school was different.

I had come to The Community School that day to explore the possibility of some sort of mentoring role. I thought maybe I could come in *once a week* and be *generally supportive* to *one or two* of the students. So Tom and I spoke. He told me about the school and the intensity of its academic focus, and said there really was no opportunity within the school's busy curriculum for mentoring per se. That's when I got my *second indication* that this school was different. Rather than simply say, thanks for coming by/see you around, Tom (being Tom) wasn't about to let my casual interest in the school just walk back out the door.

“Tell me a little bit about what you do,” he said. I told him about my long career in the advertising business, that I was now retired and doing some consulting and some writing. “WRITING! AHA!” Tom exclaimed. I could almost see a little light bulb appear over Tom's head and hear tiny gears moving inside as he quickly formulated a plan. “I have an idea,” he said. And so began my new career as MR. DON, THE WRITING MENTOR.

In the past two years and across three different classes, I've worked with about 30 different students. Some for an entire school year. Some for two. One student—my buddy, Sara—for more than two full school years, as hers was one of those sets of eyes that bore in on me when I first walked through the door, back in April 2008.

My involvement with the school...gradually and carefully orchestrated by Tom, via a slight modification of his favorite mantra: *Do the best you can with what you have*...the variation being: *Do the **most** you can with **who** you have*...has grown substantially over the past two years. What started in my mind as a once-a-week mentoring pit stop became *two afternoons each week* working directly with the students at the school, *several hours each weekend* grading their essays, a *Monday pit stop* to deliver the graded essays to Justin so he can transpose the grades into the students' weekly progress reports, and a similar pit stop *at the end of each week* to collect the students' final drafts of that week's essays for the weekend grading exercise. A slightly different level of involvement than I had originally envisioned!

But, of course, we're dealing here with Tom Culotta...so there's more.

I became a student *Sponsor*—last year for Kevin James and this year for Matt Wendler. Then Tom put me on the *Advisory Board*. And this year, with Tom's introduction of the school's Health Initiative, and the addition of two sessions of gym each week at the facility down the street, I was even called into action as *Mr. Don's Ambulance Service*...because what would gym sessions among 16 to 18 year olds' bursting with

pent-up energy be without a trip or two to the Emergency Room? ***Evan!*** And now, here I stand delivering the Commencement Address. *I don't know what's next, but I do know I'm not going up to that farm of Tom's in Pennsylvania. I can only imagine how much **field labor** he could pack into a weekend in the country!*

For all of this...and to all of you...and even you, Tom, I say **thank you**. Thank you for allowing me into your community.

I believe my role at the school is unique among the volunteers...most of whom help the students with Math. There's not much ambiguity about Math. The science of numbers and symbols can be pretty complicated stuff, but it's also rather cut-and-dry. You either have the right answer or you don't. Math is...about Math. But ***Writing is about life.***

Between the writing topics that Tom assigns each week and my one-on-one sessions with each student to discuss their essays AND talk about "*how things are going,*" I get a pretty good insight into the students' lives—their experiences, their frustrations, their hopes and their dreams. I *know* how important The Community School is to them. And I know how important *the people in this room* are to them.

This is a terrific group of kids who worked very hard this year to improve themselves. They did it for themselves...and for you—their parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, sponsors and friends. You should *all* feel very proud!

To all of you here today—whatever your role may be, including the role of student—I urge you to never forget *how important you are to one another*.

Several years ago, I met a young boy. He was 11 at the time and in pretty rough shape. His father left home when the boy was two. For the next several years, his mother, who had some problems with substance abuse, struggled to raise the boy and his older sister (step sister actually) with a little help from the boy's grandparents. Despite the mother's issues, the boy absolutely adored her, and was very close to his grandfather. When the boy was 7, the grandfather died. A year later, the grandmother died. And a year after that, when the boy was 9, his mother died. For much of the next year, the boy and his sister lived with their stepfather, who proceeded to sexually abuse the sister. The state stepped in to remove the children from that situation and place them instead with an aunt and uncle, who proceeded to physically abuse the boy. The sister ran away and the boy was placed with his only remaining "family" member—an aunt who was mentally deficient. That did not go well. The Department of Social Services finally placed the boy in one of its courts of last resort—St. Vincent's Center for abused children...out here in Baltimore County. On the day he arrived at St. Vincent's, the boy's worldly belongings fit in a brown paper bag like you might carry your lunch in. He also brought with him huge loads of anger and distrust, and a substantial need for medication to control his potential for violence. Ironically though, despite being a country boy from the Eastern Shore, now living in close quarters with twenty *city* kids with similar problems, St. Vincent's represented the most stable home the boy had ever known. Soon after he arrived at St. Vincent's, the boy and I met. That was six years ago.

Eventually, the boy went back to the Eastern Shore and into foster care with a young couple that lived in a “double-wide” in a trailer park. The couple didn’t have much, but what they had, they cared for. The “double-wide” was spotless. And the boy was loved.

Of course, he still had his issues. As recently as two years ago, the boy was briefly committed to The Rockford Center in Delaware—a psychiatric facility for kids with behavioral problems—because of some difficulties at school. But he worked his way through that situation and his “new family” stuck with him.

This past Tuesday, five days ago, Sande and I attended the boy’s high school graduation in Salisbury. As I sat there and watched him walk across the stage to receive his acknowledgement, I thought about all that I just shared with you. And I realized that, through it all, the boy *never gave up on himself*. And his foster parents, who have now become his adoptive parents, *never gave up on him*.

I have no illusions that the boy’s troubles are over. He’ll carry the burden of his experiences with him for the rest of his life. But he’ll also carry with him the realization of *what it is to grow up*. What it is to *not give up*. And *what it is to be loved and supported*.

Which brings me back to this room today and this Class of 2010.

You are here today because you did not give up on yourselves...and the people in this room did not give up on you. Every one of you has had disappointments and failures. Every one of you could have taken the easy way out. But every one of you bellied up to the bar of hard work, early mornings, late evenings, Honor Codes, and Tom's five infamous Keys To Success. *You didn't give up. You grew up.*

Some of you will be moving on now. Take this experience with you. Take the hard work, the honor code, the five keys—and apply them...*wherever you go, whatever you do.* And take your parents love and support...and *give it back.* Give it back to them and *pass it on to others.*

Me. I'm going to take the summer now and regroup for next year. I'll go down to the beach, put my feet up, close my eyes and think about the year that I had with the Class of 2010.

- Amanda—the only girl I ever took to a Ravens game. Unfortunately, on one of the coldest, rainiest, most miserable days of the year. But by God, we sat out there until the last whistle blew. She's tough. I, of course, was sick for a week afterwards.
- Anthony—often the first student to want to meet with me for the individual Writing Review sessions. For the longest time, I thought it was because he was so inspired by my words of wisdom that he simply could not wait to hear them. Eventually, I realized that it was just his way of assuring that he would not get

- hung up meeting with me late in the day, when he was desperately trying to get the OK from Tom to leave. I have to give Anthony credit for creativity in “early dismissal” tactics. He was even willing to break his pinky to cop a little time off!
- Brianna—how shocked I was to learn that, under the guise of a lovely and studious young lady, lay a future hopeful to join the Monster Trucker circuit. She and her sisters have it all figured out. One will handle the mechanical stuff; one will handle the business aspects; and Brianna will do the driving. Monster Truckin’ Mommas! Look out, world.
  - C.J.—when it’s time to go out, CJ knows how to dress up. The day Tom took the class to the Italian American Dinner, CJ was the picture of sartorial splendor. Looking good, AND smelling good. He likes a little cologne. Actually, he likes A LOT of cologne. But nobody wears it better, or looks better in it. It even earned him his own posse. At the first Sponsor Meeting last fall, there must have been 40 people in the room. I think ten of them came with CJ.
  - Evan—You want to talk sports? This is your man. He is always on top of whatever’s happening in sports, especially in the NFL. I used to scour the Sports pages extra hard on the days I met with Evan just to have a chance of keeping up. Evan even planned his trip to Europe this summer so he’d be back in time for the opening of Ravens training camp. The day the Ravens 2010 schedule was released, he immediately dropped a none-too-subtle hint about how great it would be if “SOMEBODY” took him to the game against the Saints.
  - Freddy—the student who belies the belief that man cannot live on chicken tenders and cookie dough alone. Early on, Freddy told me that he had a sensitive stomach.

I asked him what kind of sandwiches he liked. Don't like sandwiches, he said. What don't you like about them, I asked. The bread, he answered. You don't eat bread, I said. Nope. But you eat raw cookie dough? Oh yeh, Mr. Don, I love it. Who knows? Maybe it'll catch on. Heck, they put pigs in a blanket. Why not *chicken doughnuggets*? Waddya think, Freddy? Dough-nuggets? Let's talk about it. I know some people in advertising.

- Kim—the girl in the fedora. I could always count on two things when I met with Kim. One, her essay would be creative and have attitude. Two, I'd better be on top of my game when I suggested editorial revisions, or Kim would have attitude. I'd suggest; she'd challenge. I'd recommend; she'd "think about it." I'd say, this part doesn't make sense to me; she'd say, it does to me. It was exhausting, but it was worth it. The only student I ever gave a perfect grade of 100 (and believe me, I REALLY tried to find SOMETHING wrong with that essay), Kim has talent to go along with that attitude.
- Larry—his Writing M.O. is like everything else about Larry...concise and to the point, without much elaboration, but often served up with a sense of humor. Larry's a great guy. In fact, I'm suggesting to Tom that he make Larry the school's head recruiter. New students arrive and I always ask them how they heard about the school. Oh, Larry lives in my neighborhood. OR, I play ball with Larry at the Rec. OR, my brother's best friend's second cousin knows Larry. Everybody knows Larry!
- Matt—at the start of the year, when Tom asked me if I'd be a sponsor for Matt, he told me: Matt's a great kid. His only problems are eating and sleeping. Wow!

Most kids have problems with Math or History. Eating & sleeping...that's pretty basic stuff. But Matt quickly adjusted to Community School life. He learned to stock up on his sleeping on the weekends...so much so that when I told him I'd pick him up at 11:30 for a Ravens game, he said, What if I'm not up yet? And eating? Well, Tom's health initiative, and gym classes, helped there. Matt's a pretty good athlete and he REALLY gets into the games. You might say he likes to "let er rip" in gym...which is exactly what his pants did in the middle of one particularly intense game of gym hockey.

- Sara—nobody brightens my day like Sara. And hopefully, a few years from now, she'll be brightening a lot more people's days when she has her own radio program. "The Sara Ciulla Show." I don't know that she's settled on a format yet, but I'm thinking she could become the Oprah of radio. Interviewing ordinary people who do extraordinary things, celebrities who want her blessing, authors trying to sell their books. Her audience will be huge and her endorsements powerful. But she'll never forget her roots here in Baltimore. She'll be our hero—just like she is now.
- Tevin—the funny thing about Tevin is that he actually believes he could beat me one-on-one in basketball. Sad that he deceives himself like that. Seriously, Tevin, aka Lil Boosie, has done great this year. The improvement in his writing has been exceptional and his determination to learn impressive. And, of course, he likes to have fun. One day, he decided it would be fun if he and CJ came back *together* to meet with me. I got CJ on one side, Tevin on the other, their two essays in front of

me, and they're looking at me like, OK, Mr. Don, let's see what you got! I was the entertainment that day.

It's been an interesting year. Nine students started; eleven finished. There were a few moments early on when I wasn't so sure this was going to be good year or a good class. But those moments passed quickly and I soon realized that, once again, Tom had taken a roomful of distinct and independent personalities and transformed them into "the best class ever."

Thank you.

Don Riesett