

The State of the School Address

Tuesday, January 29, 2008

Fellow students, esteemed faculty, and dear friends:

I was going to start with a joke this morning. And I know that would have made your day. But, I'm afraid I can't. Yesterday, a classmate had a judge issue me a restraining order. Because of my "improper and neglectful use" of comedy and humor, I can't come within 20 words of any joke. You can see the restraining order during lunch if you want to.

I know you're disappointed, but there's nothing I can do. Even if I could tell a joke, all my writers are still on strike. But on to business.

Why am I doing this? Why am I taking up your precious homework...I mean homeroom time to give a speech I don't have to give. Why should you even care about the state of the school?

I am talking to you today because Woods is in a state of transition. For the past 10 years, we have been the little charter that could—the school in the shopping mall that everybody laughed at—until we started kicking some serious academic butt. We have been a school of academic excellence. But we have also been a school of close community.

The relationships we have here at Woods are so unique and so special. Those relationships are what make Woods different from any other school I've ever gone to, and they are the reason that I love this school. I love that I go to a school where teachers know and care about their students. Where students are so passionate, and so friendly. I love the culture at Woods which is so open, so accepting, and so genuine.

From the very first time I stepped foot in the atrium and saw sophomores mixing with second graders, I knew this school was different. You pulled me into Woods and you made me feel at home. And you have done the same thing for all the other students who have come to Woods over the years. You welcomed them to Cole Park High, but starting next year, you will welcome them to Briar Chapel High. And things will not be the same.

We'll have multiple bathrooms for the high school, Mr. Temple's room will no longer serve as a hallway, and the walls in Ms. Gerber's room won't shake when someone sneezes. There has been a lot of talk of what will happen to Woods when we leave Cole Park, and I am sad to say, a lot of what I've heard has not been good.

There seems to be this idea that the new building will rob Woods of its soul, and that we will become "just another public school" when we get a building with actual hallways and real classrooms. I think it is safe to say that the new building has left some people with a sour taste in their mouths. And there are other folks, like me, who are cautiously optimistic about Woods beyond Cole Park. "How do you feel about the new building?" you ask us. And we reply: It's pretty sweet.

To me, this sounds like a delicious combination waiting to happen.

My friends, when life gives you lemons, you make ...?
And when life gives you a little sugar you add it to...?

Well, I like a little sugar in my lemonade.

Because whatever you think about the future of your school, whether you are sweet or sour, one thing stays the same.

It is your school.

You can pucker up at the thought of the new building, or you can lick your lips in anticipation, but one thing remains. It is your school to mold, to shape, to make your own.

Teachers and administrators have some say over what kind of culture a school has. They can organize classes, sponsor clubs, and create an environment where true community can happen. Over the past few months, the student council has been working to collect your ideas about what changes we can make to that school environment as we move into the new building. We took in your suggestions, your criticisms, and your concerns and we made a list—a list of what “the Man” can do to help student life in the new building.

We asked for longer lunches, more electives, the chance for you all to be TA’s for the middle and elementary schools. And we got them. Our teachers and administrators have already committed to helping us maintain the sense of community that we love about Woods. They are ready to do whatever they can to help us preserve the culture of this school. But they can only do so much. They can write the outline, but we have to finish the paper. They can train us and coach us, but we have to sink the baskets.

The culture of a school is not made by decisions of a school board, or the actions of a principal. It is made by the way that students choose to act every moment of every day. We can rely on our teachers to sustain the culture at Woods that we all love. They will try, and they will try hard, but they will ultimately fail. Because they can’t do it alone.

It reminds me of a little kid who really wants the coolest new game for his Wii. He can use his birthday money to buy the game, but that’s not enough to cover the cost. So what does he do? He could buy another game that doesn’t cost as much, but it wouldn’t be the one he really wants. Or, he could earn some extra money on the side. He could mow some lawns, wash some cars, or open a lemonade stand. My friends, if we want to maintain the community at Woods, we are going to have to go the extra mile. It is not enough for us to sit back and let the teachers try to create community. For one thing, it won’t work, and for another, we really don’t like being bossed around. Is community really community when it is dictated by the administration? Is community really community when you are forced to participate? True community can only exist when the people who live in that community have a passionate desire to make it work and are willing to make that community a reality.

Woods is not a place. It is a state of mind.

Woods is not Cole Park Plaza, or Briar Chapel, or ever Chatham County. Woods is not test scores, new buildings, or anything else you can measure.

You my friends, you are Woods.

Don't forget that this school was founded by Roger Gerber, uncle to my friends Eric and Chad and our own Ms. Gerber, because he wanted a place where students were the center of education, a place where students were the motivation for everything that happened.

Woods was founded as a place where students could take ownership of their education, a place where students were the heart and soul of the school community.

More than teachers, parents, or administrators, this is your school.

It is what you make of it.

And with that in mind, I am excited to announce the Lemonade Initiative. What is the Lemonade Initiative? It is just a plan to make some lemonade.

Whether you are sweet or sour about the new school building, it is still your school and the responsibility for preserving the culture of Woods falls squarely on your shoulders. Whether you feel life has give you lemons or a spoon full of sugar, my challenge to all of us, myself included, is to come up with ways to combine those ingredients to make Woods the best school we can. And to be clear, I'm not talking about things that the teachers can do, or the principal can do, or things the school board can do. I'm talking about the things that we the students can do.

Rachel Cooper—You're sitting right in front of one of the best examples of what I'm talking about. For those who can't see, Rachel is sitting in front of locker 49. What's so special about locker 49? Well, if you ever need a spoon, you can find one in locker 49. Here's another one: Who's ever had a runny nose at school and couldn't find some Kleenex? Next time, try locker 15.

Both of these services have been provided to us by the Woods Conservative Party. And while I can't condone all of their shenanigans, the Conservative Party wanted to do something to help the community. But rather than complaining to the administration or waiting for someone else to do something, they just made it happen. They have reminded me of the small things that students can do to make this community better. We would all do well to follow their lead.

Another example of a Lemonade Initiative is something that the student council is currently working on: a Student Teach Day. Imagine one day when we switch things up and give students the chance to share their knowledge and skills with the school community. Josh Brooks might teach us to tickle some ivories, Parker Twiss could share a little dolphin intelligence, and Ben Hock could teach us the fine art of ranting.

Here's another idea. What if we created a Cole Park time capsule, a monument to the original Woods Charter School? We could submit those things which make Woods special: A picture of Mr. Bryan plunging a toilet. A list of things we see on a daily basis that kids in other schools haven't even heard of...like secret passage ways to a pizza place and the sound of dogs barking during a Spanish quiz. A story of the time you made a friend standing in line for the bathroom. Memories, stories, pictures, videos—whatever we can use to keep the old Woods alive in the new building.

These are just three examples of ways that we can enhance the school community. But the possibilities are endless. Have you ever wanted to try that basket weaving thing that Mrs. Futrell is always talking about? Start a club. Get some friends and try it out. Organize a community service project. Start a can drive, or get a group to work on a habitat house. Volunteer as a TA or a tutor. Get some friends together for a study groups. Whatever it is, we can use it to build community.

This is your school. It is time to make it yours.

One thought in closing:

A really smart guy once said that, without a vision, people will perish. Without something to guide us, our community will crumble.

Without our community, things will never be the same.

This is our last semester at Cole Park Plaza. Next year, you won't be able to walk next door to Caio Bella or grab a snack from DG. And things will be different. Like many of you, I'm worried about what the new building means for our community. But I'm more afraid that we will forget our vision, that we will lose sight of what makes Woods Woods.

Look around you. What you see here—this is our vision. This is our purpose. A school where community is the center of everything we do. Will it last? Will the Woods spirit live on past Cole Park?

That depends on you, because you are Woods at its very core. The state of the school is in your hands. I'm just here to make some lemonade.

Thank you.

A special thanks to Cotton Bryan, Becca Solomon, Matt Phillips, and Carolyn Stotts for their editing, encouragement, and support. I owe them so much more than lemonade.

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