

Prize Day Speech
May 30th, 2021
Nicholas Braun '06

Good morning, everyone! Hello Saint Marker's! Those here in person and those watching via webstream. Hello to the faculty and to the parents and to all the strangers who have crashed this Prize Day. Welcome and *why*. Why did you do that?

My name is Nicholas Braun, and I am a member of the Saint Mark's Class of 2006.

I am enormously grateful to John Warren for inviting me to speak today. Saint Mark's holds a very special place in my heart. I spent four years here as a boarder, and feel very proud to be a Saint Marker every time I come back to campus.

First off, congratulations to you Sixth Formers on a very difficult and trying part of your life. Saint Mark's is not easy. Long, sleepless nights. Six-day weeks packed with classes and sports and a cappella groups and chapels and dorm meetings and school meetings and checking your mailbox three - sometimes *four* - times a day... It's a lot. And in a pandemic? It must have been a whole new level of difficulty and frustration. So to this class - you deserve a round of applause. For hanging in there. Pushing through and getting to this finish line. You can finally breathe. You are here. They *definitely* have your diploma up here.....right John?

In preparation for this speech, I wanted to think about - what would be most useful for you guys? I've been in your shoes. I've been sitting right where you are. So: eighteen-year-old me. Where was my head at? What was I like? What did I need to hear on Prize Day?

Well, I'll paint a picture for you. I was very... "mid-pubescent" let's call it - even at eighteen. Didn't understand how the Varsity Football players and Hockey players had so much hair. Such large muscles. And the voices of *men*. I, for the last two years of Saint Mark's, pitched my voice down so I could seem more manly. Tried to send it just a few notes lower. And I thought I was pulling it off! The thing was. I was a tenor in choir. A *high tenor* - not sure if that's what it was called but I had *range*.

I sagged my pants. The belt, the waist of the pants was...*under* my butt. So I couldn't tuck in my shirt. And this was all to give the effect, I believed, of hiding just how skinny, how boney, how un-muscular I was.

I didn't sleep much. I never wanted to miss out on anything. So whoever was up latest, I was up with them. As a senior, I lived up in Coe House, and we clocked hundreds of hours of NHL '06 on my Playstation 2. Or we'd chip golf balls in the hall or shave our

heads together or play chair basketball. You'll never guess how that game was played.

I wasn't perfect by any means. Senior year I was thrown out of a Boys Hockey Game for cheering TOO aggressively during a timeout. The coach at the time and coincidentally my Dorm Head, Mr. McGrady, yelled across Gardner Hockey rink: "Shut UP Nick!"

Junior year I was SDC'd. SDC'd! The dreaded Student Disciplinary Committee. When I found out, I thought I was ruined as a Saint Marker. I sat with a few of my friends up in Sawyer and cried. I was so ashamed. Four days suspension, in my junior year.

Now I'm sure some of you have done some bad things in your time at Saint Mark's - like - you, Suzy, well - you.....you took somebody else's cheesy bread from the Common Room fridge. That is *messed up*.

And you - Jimmy - you tried to burn down the Black Box Theatre. We let that slide, but you can't be doing that sorta stuff anymore, 'kay?

I also - did not get into my colleges of choice. As everyone else seemingly got into their dream schools, I taped on my door some acceptance letters that meant nothing to me. I wanted NYU. I wanted USC. I auditioned to get into their theatre programs and I was rejected by both. I guess I didn't do ol' Willy Shakespeare justice in those auditions. Maybe I didn't totally (finger quotes) "understand what I was saying." So maybe they (finger quotes) "made the right decision." Ah, well.

I didn't have a summer job lined up, I didn't know my major. I thought it might be math. Thanks to my Algebra 1 Enhanced teacher, the late, great Mr. Pettus, who inspired an obsession with math for me in my Third Form year.

Do you still have that class, by the way? "Algebra 1 *Enhanced*"? It was sort of like "We think you know algebra, but not really, so - let's give it another go"...

The point is - on Prize Day - I didn't feel ready. I was clueless about how to embark on my next chapter.

Some of you may be feeling that way today.

But whether you know it or not. This school has helped you understand so much about yourself. It's unavoidable. Saint Mark's forces you to try. And I believe that's the best thing we can ever do. Just try.

There was a dance we had, back in 2002, my Third Form year, that carried with it a long-standing tradition. It was the first dance in the Fall, Third Formers were encouraged to *publicly* ask out Sixth Formers. An initiation of sorts. So - I'm 14 years old. I've

been at Saint Mark's for a month. And I set my eyes on this really cool girl named Dominique, who I was in choir with and who had the most amazing singing voice. And one day I decide... I'm going to ask her at lunch. So I'm waiting...and then I see her walk in from the little beverage tunnel area, and she walks up the steps to the 6th Form tables. And I muster up some kind of courage and climb up on my dining table and belt out "WHY DON'T YOU BUILD ME UP - BUTTERCUP BABY!" and I do it and really go for it and it feels like the whole school cheered and at the end of the song I ask her to go to the dance with me. And she says yes!

Scary as hell. But I went for it. And it worked out.

I believe that trying is winning. I tell that to myself all the time these days.

I get extremely nervous for parts of my job. I'm a professional actor. I'm currently on a television show called "Succession" on HBO and I've been making films and television shows since I was six years old. It's not the acting part.

It's the going on talk shows or doing press events. Red carpets. Premieres. I get panic attacks. But I just tell myself - trying is winning. You can't be perfect. You won't be perfect. But just go out there, and try. See what happens.

I walked up to Quentin Tarantino once on a plane. He was in first class and I saw him on the way in. So I went to my seat, I had a Tiger Beat magazine in my backpack (I don't know how or why I did? Maybe I bought it in the airport) but I was just so psyched to be on a magazine, because there was an ad - for a Disney Channel movie I had coming out that weekend, called Minutemen - on the back. Have you guys seen Minutemen? Well if you have, you would understand that this ad is me, and two other teenage boys with our hair all swooped perfectly to the side, flying through the time-space continuum in snowsuits and ski goggles, because the time-space continuum is apparently *cold*, with our eyes wide like "NOOOOOO!"

So I ripped the ad off the back of the magazine, and I walked to the front of the plane and I leaned across the person sitting next to him on the aisle and I gave it to him. I said - "Mr. Tarantino, I know you don't know me - but I'm in this movie. And it premieres this weekend - if you wanna watch it? I really hope I can work with you someday." And he looked at the ad and he smiled and said "I hope so too" and I walked back to my seat and felt SO GOOD. SO BRAVE. My heart thumped that whole flight. I thought, I'm going to walk off this plane and he'll be waiting for me at the gate, ready to offer me a part in his next movie.

I have not heard from Quentin Tarantino since.

I tried, I failed - but good! Got that out of my system. If you don't try, the question will always remain in your head. "Maaaybe

I might like this?" Or: "maybe I should ask that person for help?"

I think at this point in your lives, eighteen, moving on to the next chapter - you might think - OK what's the BIG dream? What's that one thing I have to go for?

I actually don't think it's about that *one big dream*. My one big dream wasn't to meet Mr. Tarantino, it just presented itself and in a moment I had to follow my gut. You won't only have one or two dreams your whole life that you have to work towards. You'll have them all the time. Little ones. Like, I bet you have a few right now:

"I really want to say *this* to this person before we possibly never see each other again."

"I really want to thank Mrs. McBride for sitting with me and explaining how to find the volume of a cone on five different occasions."

"I really want to apologize to this person."

Or "I really want to go sit in silence in my dorm room for five minutes and reflect on how crazy this year was."

These are all little feelings you should pay attention to. Embrace them. "I really want to steal a Moosehead from the dining hall." Then go do it! Follow the little dreams. That moose is DEAD.

Please don't steal a Moosehead.

You don't have to know your whole life's plan right now. I promise you. And the big dreams. Well, those may take longer than you want them to take. I started acting at SIX years old. I'm 33. I've been doing this for twenty seven years and I only recently started to believe that someone *might* hire me again.

The more exciting dreams are these little ones. You start to get the feeling you might want to pick up a paintbrush or play a guitar even though you're getting a degree in business? Do it! You don't have to change careers, but it can *widen* your life.

I think, you've got to pay attention to these question marks in your head. Because when the road gets windy, which it surely will, it might be time to try something different. **And trying is winning.**

I am so extremely proud of you guys. I don't know all of you, I'm lucky to know a few of you, but looking out at your faces today, I feel so much hope for what you'll bring to the world. Go out there, live your lives with passion and courage and kindness and you can't go wrong.

Thank you and congratulations to the Class of 2021!!!