

## Elizabeth Carcieri: “Discover your passions and follow them.”

Good evening to all of our guests, families, friends, faculty, administration, and my fellow graduates.

I am truly honored to be addressing you all today as Toll Gate High School’s class of 2017 valedictorian.

Today is the day that the class of 2017 celebrates the culmination of 13 years of schooling. Today is the day that we will walk the stage with radiant smiles and shiny eyes and finally receive our diplomas.

It is crazy to think that 13 years ago, we were just kindergarteners. It seems like it was only yesterday that I was boarding the bus to Cedar Hill Elementary School. But, a lot has happened since the days of show and tell which has formed us into the individuals we are today.

Over the past four years we have shared many good times, but have also gone through many transitions, some of which have not been easy. The closing of Warwick Vets High School was unexpected and unfortunate. However, the addition of the students from Vets to our senior class has added so much to life at Toll Gate that I wish we had the chance to spend more time together.

Secondly, Toll Gate experienced a major loss this year, with the unexpected death of our principal Mr. Chrabaszc. Mr. Chrabaszc was such a presence at the school that in many ways it was hard to think about Toll Gate without thinking about “dear parents and guardians of all Toll Gate High School students.” About two weeks before he passed away, I met with Mr. Chrabaszc to discuss a college recommendation. During that time, he showed such an interest in me as a person, and in what my dreams and ambitions were for the future. We had an amazing conversation. Even though I doubted myself about certain things, he had faith in me. When I got my college acceptances, he was all I thought of. His loss hit Toll Gate hard and without a doubt, our school has still not completely recovered. Although he is not here today, I know he is looking down upon us with a big smile saying how much he loves his kids.

We also had many memorable times at Toll Gate High School. For a lot of us, after spending 4 years and about 720 days together, it is almost impossible to not form strong bonds with a class as wonderful as ours. From yelling at pep rallies, to dancing the night away at prom, we have had our good times. Some of those times were so funny that they were even hard to believe, like the day we got to leave school early because of a sewage overflow or the day when school was cancelled because of a pipe burst. And believe it or not, we all acted as teammates sometimes, even if we were not literally on a sports team. Anytime there was even a chance of snow, we all came together to hope for a snow day.

High school has meant more to us than most people are willing to admit. It has become like a second home, a place where we would go each day and see some very special

people. Now that we are leaving this home, we can finally admit, how much the Toll Gate family means to us.

Many of the teachers we have met have proven to be more than teachers. They have become our friends. Even though we sometimes thought they were cruel to us, or suspected that they conspired with each other so that they would all give tests on the same day, they have shown us how much they truly care. Their willingness to give extra help when we needed it, their friendliness, and openness are all traits that many of our teachers have. I would like to thank my teachers for pushing me to do my very best in all of my classes and always having faith in me.

The only sad part about today is that we know we will be leaving many of our friends. Some of whom have been almost like brothers and sisters to us. They have made these past years very special. There are many memories that we've shared that will never be forgotten. In school they've been our comic relief when things began to get too serious in class, our support when we tried to convince teachers that we truly did deserve those extra points, and our tutors in grueling subjects such as geometry and physics, and sometimes even our matchmakers. I would like to thank my friends for making my high school experience unforgettable. You all know who you are. I will always remember the great times we had together. And most importantly, thanks for being there for me every step of the way. I don't think I would have survived high school without you all.

Today means a lot to me. When I first came to Toll Gate as a freshman I set a goal to do as best as I could, and I crossed my fingers hoping I would be here today making a speech, and I am. I could not have done this without some very special people in my life, my family. I would not have been able to accomplish as much as I did in high school without my parents and sisters. Thank you for being there, for giving me the support I needed to achieve what I have achieved, and for really loving me.

I know that my fellow graduates feel the same way about their families. On behalf of the class of 2017, I would like to thank all of the families. You have been our support, our shoulder to cry on, and our friends. We owe you a great deal. Just as you have always been there for us, we know that even now as we are about to enter into a larger, and somewhat frightening world, and be faced with more challenges and responsibilities. You will continue to be there for us.

Since September 2013 to June 2017, all of us have grown a lot from nervous freshmen to mature seniors. We are now young adults who are ready to take on the world. Today marks the definitive end of a chapter and the start of another. The next chapter of our lives is not yet written. We are at the cusp of limitless opportunities that will determine if the next chapter is a best seller. Some may want to take the easy path, but I urge you to chase after your dreams and achieve new heights that someday you will look back on your life with a satisfied smile. Some will join the military, workforce, while many of us will continue our education as college students. For many of us, we will pack up our bags and say farewell to friends and family that mean the world to us. But, our experiences at Toll Gate could not have prepared us better. Not only did we learn to battle the senioritis

epidemic, but we also learned many life lessons that have made us armed and ready for whatever the world has to throw at us.

As I say farewell to my fellow classmates, I encourage you to go out and live your life to the fullest. Discover your passions and follow them. But, don't chase after things that don't make you happy. Measure your level of success based on the joy you have rather than wealth or materialism. As Albert Schweitzer, a French-German philosopher has said, "Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success." I believe that a happy life is a successful life no matter what job you hold or how much money you make. Have a joyful spirit in whatever you do and explore all that life has to offer.

As I conclude my speech, I would like you all to look on either side of you. Look at your classmates. This will be the last time that Toll Gate's class of 2017 will be all together. Perhaps you know each other, or perhaps you are meeting for the first time now. You see, all of us have different lives, different goals, and have all gotten something different out of high school. Toll Gate High School has brought together hundreds of unique individuals who have all contributed to the greatness of the class of 2017, but we all have something in common. Tonight, we have the same caps, gowns, and will have the same diploma. We are all Toll Gate, and we are all titans. We all have limitless opportunities before us. Good luck in all of your future endeavors.

Congratulations to Toll Gate's class of 2017. Once a Titan, always a Titan. Thank you!