

Superintendent Terry George, board members, distinguished guests, friends and family, welcome and thank you for joining Keith and me on this truly special day.

My journey at Pickens School began my fourth grade year, when I transferred from George Ward Elementary to join Keith, making him no longer the only student in his grade (which I'm sure he was happy about because now he didn't have to do all the talking)

There are many things that I have learned throughout my years here at Pickens and I'd like to share some of them with you today. Each of the teachers has played an essential role in the lives of us graduates. Upon my entry to Pickens, Mrs. Betler quickly welcomed me into her classroom. Since elementary school, Mr. Shiflett has taught Keith and me physical education and health, and for the past two years he has tried his best to smooth over his West Virginia country accent during our French classes. Mr. Shiflett, we know how passionate you are for Pickens and the students. I know that you will truly be missed now that you are retiring.

And now Mr. and Mrs. Hudok: Having had both of them throughout middle and high school, I quickly grew accustomed to having my parents as teachers. Mrs. Hudok has dealt with my frustration and helped me stay calm many times during math classes while solving polynomial equations and factoring. She has been both a supportive parent and teacher throughout my career. Mr. Hudok always seems finds a story from his life to relate to the current class material. One story that I will always remember was the time Mr. Hudok was at a dinner at the Manhattan Hilton in New York City, and he asked the waiter for butter. The waiters confused him for the famous actor Steve Martin, and at first, Mr. Hudok jokingly went along with it. Then, the waiters began bringing all kinds of butter and food to his table, and when they started asking for autographs, he didn't have the heart to let them down. After a while nothing Mr. Hudok said shocked me, as I prepared myself for some pretty crazy stories!

Since middle school, Keith and I have had a history of history teachers. Mr. Anderson, Mrs. Thompson, and Mrs. Currence taught us to appreciate the stories of our country and world. Mrs. Knotts taught us how to read and analyze what became some of my favorite plays and novels, especially *Of Mice and Men*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Animal Farm*. Mrs. Knotts has

instilled good grammar habits that have definitely prepared me for further education. No one escapes my grammatical corrections, as my sisters and friends can attest to.

However, it wasn't solely the French, English, Literature, History, Math and Science that I learned. I also acquired some very valuable life skills during my time at Pickens. *Probably the most important: not being afraid of being different, when different is, in fact, better.* Pickens isn't like any ordinary school. We are a K-12 institution with only around 35 students. Despite its small size, I love it and couldn't ask for a better place to have spent 4<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Pickens is more than just a school; we are a family. It is easy to see how much everyone cares for one another. The teachers at Pickens find their students' levels of learning and teach them where they are. We students really have a strong desire to do our best in class and work to better ourselves as well as to please our teachers. We help not only our classmates and peers, but also take our own time to aid younger students with classwork. Unlike most public schools, we don't have locks on the lockers, writing on the bathroom walls, and while walking in the hallways during class change, it is easy to see that there is no inappropriate language spoken. We are one special school. When visitors come, they often comment on the difference between our school and others. I have always heard this said in a good way. *Here, at Pickens, we hold onto our morals, values, and traditions. And we are proud to be different.*

Now, it is time for us graduates to take a step forward and go out into the world. Up to this point, we have been cocooned in a "safe" world by our parents and teachers. Now, as we step out of this protective Pickens community, we must be able to stand on our own two feet and have a strong backbone despite the opposition we will face.

Those of you who know me well, know that I have had quite a year. *Reality hit me this school year. I was faced with a decision: to give into what I strongly believed was wrong and accept the mandatory vaccinations or to be different from nearly all other students and to refuse the vaccinations. I no longer was in that cocoon where important decisions were being made for me; instead, this was a decision I had to make on my own. I knew that I had to stand up for what I believed whatever the sacrifices may be.* By deciding not to be vaccinated, I was told that I could not physically attend Pickens School, and it was even questioned whether I

could attend my prom and graduation. Nevertheless, I'm thankful to be here on this day to graduate with my classmate, Keith. A special thanks to the media for fair coverage, also Dr. Phares, Dr. Arnett, Superintendent Terry George, Delegate Patrick Lane, Principal Betler and school staff as well as my pastor Butch Paugh, close friends and family. Thanks for your support. You were all instrumental in helping me through this.

**We all face many obstacles in life.** And now that we are adults, we will have to overcome these hardships by ourselves. Yes, we will hopefully have support from friends and family and our faith, but we will also have opposition from those disagreeing with our decisions. Therefore, we must be wise and strong enough to stand for what we know is right. As Founding Father Alexander Hamilton once said, "Those who stand for nothing fall for anything." I find this quote to contain much truth. When I have feelings of discouragement, I remind myself of what this Founding Father said.

Perhaps more than most other schools, Pickens knows what it means to stand up for itself. There came a time, years ago, when it was questioned whether Pickens should be shut down or not because the expenses to keep it running were too high for the county board. There was a plan to transfer the students in buses to nearby schools and teachers would have to find new work as well. However, the teachers and staff didn't just "go with the flow"; instead, they fought to keep it open. Former Principal, Mr. Biggs, was very influential in keeping Pickens School open. He, along with the other teachers did what they could because they knew Pickens was a special place and that it was best for the students. They knew that it would be difficult for the students to have to travel over forty-five minutes on a school bus every day to attend school. They also knew that the individualized learning the students had at Pickens should not be replaced with anything else. Because of their tenacity not to give in, Keith and I were able to receive not only a valuable education but also important life skills.

As we leave this safe haven, we graduates will face situations that test our ability to stand apart. There may be times where we are the only adult in the room, or when no one knows how to proceed and we must take control. There will be times when we are part of an audience where everyone else is nodding along to a speaker without even considering their

words. We will have to think about what we are being told and be able to evaluate its validity rather than blindly accepting what we are told—whether from our bosses, our professors, or our government officials. There will be papers to sign that we mustn't put our names to without consideration. We cannot make rash choices, and instead, we must evaluate from both sides before making a choice. When action is needed, we **must** be able to stand strong. And when we step out on the front line, we will have to take those figurative rotten eggs and vegetables being thrown at us. But we can't back down, we have to stand sturdy and confidently. Yes, the risks may be great, but the triumphs will be even greater.

Just as Pickens School, as a whole fought, we as individuals can have the same strength as the whole school united to stand behind our morals and values. As Keith enters into the work force and I, to college, we must have that strong backbone so that as Alexander Hamilton said, we will not fall for anything. As we go our separate ways, let every day be a new commencement.

Thank you and God Bless.