

Good evening! To the Guilford High School class of 2022, to parents, guardians and families, First Selectman Hoey and our town leadership, and members of our Guilford community—welcome to Guilford High School graduation.

First, on behalf of my colleagues on the Board of Education, I would like to publicly thank Dr. Freeman for his outstanding leadership of Guilford Public Schools; I would like to thank Ms. Chaffe for her steady and expert leadership as principal of Guilford High School; and I would like to extend our heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to all our administration, our faculty, and our Guilford Public Schools' staff—for their daily and continuous commitment to excellence in education and to the well-being of our students.

To the class of 2022: This moment in time is one of significant transition. You leave Guilford Public Schools, and many of you leave Guilford—where some of you have spent your entire lives—and head for new communities: college, work, the military. As you have prepared for this transition, I imagine you have been asked innumerable times the following questions: What do you want to do? Where do you want to go? What do you want to be?

I fear that we have not asked the most important question, or certainly not asked it enough: Who do you want to be?

I suspect that many of you have spent the greater part of your high school years trying to figure out who you are, what you believe, what you value. But you haven't done so in a vacuum: there has been pressure to behave and look and dress certain ways to be part of a group, to be cool, or to be accepted. In this time of rampant social media, there appears to be little relief from this now 24/7 pressure, and the universe from which that pressure comes has expanded exponentially from your school community, your town, and your neighborhood to anyone in the world with access to the internet.

But Who you are? is not a question that can or should be answered by others.

The upcoming transitions in your lives will bring opportunities to introduce yourself, to form new connections with others, to enter into a new community on your own in a way that you may not have experienced before. And with these opportunities, I urge you to be the real you.

The last two years of the CoVid pandemic have underscored the criticality of human connection. The isolation and physical distancing we experienced significantly disrupted our human connections. The absence of these connections can have significant negative impacts on both mental and physical health. Brené Brown, well-known author and researcher of courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy at the University of Houston, makes clear that the human connections we engage in will not sufficiently feed and sustain us—indeed, they will lose a greater part of their value—if who we bring to these interactions is not who we really are. The real you needs to show up.

Not a “static you”—be open to change, new ideas, new people, new experiences. But do not take on a persona that does not fit you. Not only because there is only one you. Not only

because the world needs what you have to offer. But because it is not healthy to try being somebody else.

Be you. Might it be scary? Yes. Might someone reject you? Yes. If so, move on. Engage with people who are open to who you are and accept you for you.

And lastly, a most important request: be that person for others. Be open to differences, give others room to be who they are, and advocate for others when public support for them is needed. We have witnessed you do this many times over your years here in Guilford Public Schools. The world needs your advocacy, so I ask you to continue to provide it.

So, on this night representing both accomplishment and new beginnings, I urge you to seize the upcoming opportunities born of new places and new people, put the real you out there, and be open to the many different people you encounter. We are and will be rooting for you all the way.

And now: Dr. Freeman, Principal Chaffe, and Guilford Public Schools faculty and staff. Pursuant to the authority vested in the Board of Education by the constitution and the general statutes of the state of Connecticut, I am pleased to confirm that these students, having met all the requirements put before them, are indeed now graduates of Guilford High School.