

Dr. Paul Freeman, Superintendent GHS Graduation Speech

Mrs. Chaffe, Guilford High School Faculty and staff,  
Dr. Balestracci, and members of the Board of Education,  
Mr. Hooey, and Town officers and officials,  
Guilford Community friends,  
Proud parents and families,  
Happy Graduates, Congratulations.

Welcome to this evening's ceremony, thank you for being here, and congratulations to all of you on all that you have accomplished. I am privileged to join with this community in recognizing these young people this evening, and I am proud to accept these candidates for graduation from Guilford High School, the graduating class of 2022.

I will be brief tonight. We have learned a lot through these last several years of pandemic. One thing we learned, that I learned, is that people appreciate when my comments are brief. But I will say one thing.

Many of you know that I have four sons. Last year on my birthday, Jonah, one of our twins, gave me a book that made a real impression. He gave me *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering The Wisdom of the Forest*, by Suzanne Simard.

Simard was writing about her time and her discoveries as a forester working for the Canadian government. It boils down to this, and to be clear, this is the non-scientific explanation:

Canadian companies make a lot of money selling pine. Pine is the cash crop in the timber industry, and they have spent a lot of time and money asking really smart people how best to raise pine trees. At first, the answer seemed simple. Clear cutting. They would clear a forest of all growth, plant pine trees and only pine trees. All other growth was discouraged with herbicides and weeding. It seemed intuitive that the pines would thrive. No competition for resources. No other trees to share water or nutrients or sunlight with. No challenges, no complexities, no biodiversity. A mono culture to produce a valuable and prized product.

What Simard knew, however, and what she set out to prove, was that that was not true. Pines in clear cut forests actually did not grow as well as those in unmanaged forests. They were often smaller and more sickly; they grew slower over all. What she found was that in diverse plantings and in unmanaged areas, different trees do not so much compete, they cooperate.

Different trees with different root systems do different jobs. Some trees reach down deep into the earth, bringing water up to the surface, some of which leeches out, actually making it easier for the pines, especially the young pines, to drink. Others collect resources from photosynthesis occurring in their broad, flat leaves, and they

release some of those nutrients into the soil, actually nourishing the pines. And really interesting, all of the trees' roots, as they intertwine beneath the surface, are actually connected by a fungal network, and they communicate with each other, alerting and protecting themselves and each other from blight or pests or other infestations. Diverse plantings of trees are smarter than monocultures.

Biodiversity is a good thing. Simard knew it. Farmers know it. Loggers know it. Gardeners know it. Mono cultures deplete the soil and damage the ecosystems in which they are established. Diverse plantings enrich the soil, sustain pollinators, feed animals, and generally make our world a better place... while also producing a better product.

As you graduate tonight, as you choose to either move on and away from Guilford or to deepen your own roots here in this community, I ask you to remember that. And as we celebrate you and congratulate you on all that you have done, I also ask you to do more. We need you to do more.

It is cliché for graduation speakers to say that our generation is leaving you a world that you will need to improve upon. But clichés are clichés for a reason. *We are* leaving you a world with much to be done, work to be done. So I ask you...

When you plant your roots and establish yourselves, wherever that may be, remember that you will do better, you will thrive more, you will grow faster and stronger when you surround yourselves with trees that are not all like yourself. You will do more good in this world, and you will bring more right and light into this world when you choose to surround yourselves not only with pines, but with aspens, and firs, and oaks, and maples. With ash, and apple, and cherry; with nutmeg, and elm.

Surround yourself with others not so much like you. You will be stronger for it, and more likely to thrive for it.

Congratulations on all your accomplishments, we are proud of you, and we wish you all the best.