

Valedictorian Speech – Celia Murphy Braunstein

Good morning/afternoon family, friends, teachers, administrators and, most importantly, the class of 2021. It's my great privilege to represent the West Orange Mountaineers, as we express the pride and happiness we feel in our hearts today. We did it; we're graduating.

Walking into high school four years ago, I was riddled with anxiety and doubt. This stress permeated my school work, and I began to micromanage every aspect of my life to improve my productivity, spending many sleepless nights working on Mr. Miskimon's five page research paper or cancelling plans to study for Mr. Kirchenbauer's physics exams. Now this isn't to say that I regret my hard work, but that I regret *how* I passed through this high school.

I was so preoccupied with the "what ifs" and "could be," that I never took risks out of fear of making mistakes and straying from what my idea of a good student was. A lesson learned that your goals should not come at the expense of your well-being and relationships with others.

I'm still not immune to the pressures of the academic world, but instead of feeling dread, I'm inspired and challenged to let go of my preconceived notion of perfection and open myself up to change. We must be kind to ourselves and acknowledge our efforts. Instead of focusing on the past and "should haves," we can learn and improve and look forward.

As a person who likes to be prepared, the one thing I've learned from these extraordinary times is that you can't be. As a class, we are strong, we are resilient, and we are not afraid to speak our minds. Not only have we excelled at West Orange High School, but with fierce determination, optimism, and compassion, we have persevered through a pandemic.

I think this past year has taught us that life is unforeseeable, and is a journey that promises to be challenging. And though these first strides will be hard as we leave behind a place of friendships and personal growth, I know that we can overcome it. I know that our class is prepared to take on life with the leadership, vision, and dedication that West Orange high school, our teachers, friends, and families have instilled in us. Take with you all that you have learned and make your mark in the world.

Congratulations class of 2021! Thank you.