

When Jim Wilkirson called me 6 weeks ago and told me that I was selected as JA's Alumnus of the Year and that required me to speak at Senior awards night, I told him how nervous that made me and asked him what would I have to say to the Class of 2023?? He told me that it would just come to me. And then almost immediately I began to think of all my wonderful JA memories that I had as a student and as a parent. I thought of me sitting where you are now but 36 years ago. I thought of how much has changed on our campus physically but how much our mission has stayed the same (although the words have changed to better reflect what we do and how we do it). Have any of you read our mission statement? I am sure you have seen it all over our campus but if you haven't it says: Within our nurturing and spiritual community, Jackson Academy inspires and equips each student to lead a life of purpose and significance. Each word was very carefully and prayerfully chosen. Let me emphasis one part – lead a life of purpose and significance. I love that part. Of all the words I may say today, the

ones I want you to remember most are “LEAD A LIFE OF PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE”. What a blessing it would be to be able to lead a life of purpose and significance. So many people that love you have made such an investment in your future success so that you will be inspired and equipped to lead a life of purpose and significance. So, what does it mean to lead a life of purpose and significance? This world seems so divided. Racial divide, gender divide, political divide, ethnic divide. How do we learn to lead a life of purpose and significance in this world? What does it mean and how do you do it? How do you know if you are doing it? Teachers and faculty -- how do you know if you are inspiring and equipping our students to do it? Someone I admire so much that is a true example to me of one that is leading a life of purpose and significance gave me (along with a lot of others) a poem about living a life that matters. It painted a picture for me of what it means to lead a life of purpose and significance. I keep this poem pinned on my bulletin board behind my computer so that I

am reminded of this every day! My hope for all of us is that we all are living lives that matter. Here we go:

Ready or not, some day it will all come to an end.

There will be no more sunrises, no minutes, hours, days.

All the things you collected, whether treasured or forgotten, will  
pass to someone else.

Your wealth, fame, temporal power will shrivel to irrelevance.

It will not matter what you owned or what you were owed.

Your grudges, resentments, frustrations, and jealousies will finally  
disappear.

So, too, your hopes, ambitions, plans, and to-do lists will expire.

The wins and losses that once seems so important will fade away.

It won't matter where you came from,

Or on what side of the tracks you lived.

At the end, whether you were beautiful or brilliant, male or female,

Even your skin color won't matter.

So what will matter?

How will the value of your days be measured?

What will matter is not what you bought but what you built.

Not what you got, but what you gave.

What will matter is not your success, but your significance.

What will matter is every act of integrity, compassion, courage, or sacrifice that enriched, empowered, or encouraged others.

What will matter is not your competence, but your character.

What will matter is not how many people you knew,

But how many will feel a lasting loss when you're gone.

What will matter is not your memories,

But the memories that live in those who loved you.

Living a life that matters doesn't happen by accident.

It's not a matter of circumstance but of choice.

Choose to live a life that matters.

Author unknown.

EACH OF YOU ARE TRULY BLESSED and we are blessed because you are a gift to us from God. Not only are you blessed with talents and abilities given to you by God, gifts that make you so special, but you are also blessed with families that love you more than anything else in this world – YOU ARE VALUED. You have parents that are willing to sacrifice so significantly to send you to this wonderful school and provide you with opportunities and experiences, so few young men and women are provided.

YOU ARE VALUED. One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Luke 12:48 – it says, “WHEN SOMEONE HAS BEEN GIVEN MUCH, MUCH WILL BE REQUIRED IN RETURN; AND WHEN SOMEONE HAS BEEN ENTRUSTED WITH MUCH, EVEN MORE WILL BE REQUIRED.” You each have been given so much. We are accountable for the knowledge, resources, and abilities, that God has blessed us with. If we have been given

much, then He expects that much more from us. We all must be faithful to all that God has entrusted to us. Wow -- what a responsibility it is to be given so much. Our mission as a school is to help prepare each of you for your ultimate mission in life – to lead a life of purpose and significance – much is being given.

Then your challenge is to achieve your full potential for which you have been prepared -- much will be required. My prayer for each of you is that you will be faithful, and you will be responsible for all that has been given to you and entrusted to you. That you will:

- Do your best academically as you move into your next academic journey.
- Be a trustworthy and loyal friend
- Be an encourager of one another
- Be courageous and confident
- Build strong character
- Be kind, compassionate, tolerant, and accepting
- Be different

- Be thankful every day for what you have
- Learn to serve others and
- Give generously and sacrificially

What makes JA so great? It is each of us. It is you. It is me. It is our families. It is our collective character. It is our parents, grandparents, sisters, and brothers that have given to JA – their time, their talents, their abilities – that is what makes us stronger. We are a family here – you are part of this family and always will be. Wherever you go, wherever you are, you will always have family here. Whether you realize it or not, the relationships you have built here will support you for a lifetime. I already know so many of your parents and grandparents and students here today not because I have a child in your grade – because I don't - but because of relationships that began many years ago at this school and continue today.

Beginning again at Jackson Academy 19 years ago with my oldest daughter, Dray (who is now 24 years old and has a big girl job in Atlanta) brought back so many wonderful memories and emotions. Walking into the preschool building with her hand in mine filled my eyes with tears of joy and promise. Realizing I made this same walk with my mother a generation ago, I knew her future was in the very best of hands.

My daughter had no idea on that first day of preschool what was in store for her for the next 14 years – but I knew because I benefited from the JA experience. Reminiscing about my years at JA still fills my heart with joy, especially now that I see how much JA taught and molded my three children as JA did with me.

As you have walked the same halls that I walked, I know your steps have been guided with care. As you played football, basketball, cheered and danced on the same fields and in the same facilities that I did, I know you have made friends for a lifetime.



As you sat in the same classrooms, I know you have teachers that have cared for your minds as well as your character. They have prepared you for success. And Class of 2023, when you don your graduation caps in three weeks, I know you are prepared for the future not only academically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. While this is the end of high school and the beginning of the rest of your life for you, I have such confidence in your ending. Such confidence is rooted in the continuing traditions and spirit of JA.

I remember my high school graduation as if it was yesterday. I even remember the speaker at my high school graduation – I do not remember his name, but I remember what he said. He ended his words to me and the Class of 1987 by reciting “OH THE PLACES YOU’LL GO” by Dr. Seuss. I will not recite it for you today but probably could as many times as I have read it. If you have never read this book, I highly recommend it. This book tells a story about the things you can expect in life. If you are ever in doubt,

frustrated, overwhelmed, sad, impatient or scared –read this book. You will not be those things when you get done. Dr. Seuss describes it all– the times you are soaring to great heights with the highfliers, the times you are looking up and down streets deciding which one to go down, the scary times, the confusing times, the waiting place – for people just waiting, the banner flip flying times and the times where you feel you are grinding on for miles across weirdish wild space. At the end Dr. Seuss writes, “KID – YOU’LL MOVE MOUNTAINS”. Class of 2023, you will move mountains. You are Valued. Be prepared to be your best, to achieve great things. You are OFF to great places. Today is YOUR day. YOUR MOUNTAIN IS WAITING. But remember, Much has been Given.... Much will be Expected.

Thank you.