

## **Jackson Academy Distinguished Alumnus Speech**

**April 22, 2025**

**Good evening, and thank you very much for the warm welcome. Thank you to the JA administration, members of the faculty, family and friends, and members of the larger Jackson community. It's my great honor and privilege to be here today.**

**I'd like to pay special recognition also to Eddie Wettach, our incoming Head of School of Jackson Academy. Although I know Eddie is unable to join us tonight, we have known each other for many years, since we were both students here, and I'm delighted he's taking on the challenge of building upon the outstanding leadership that Mr. Kennedy has provided as Head of School. However, I should warn you all that when I was a JA senior, my classmates voted me "Most Likely to Be**

**JA Headmaster.” I have yet to decide to follow through on that.**

**All jokes aside, in my work, I do quite a bit of public speaking to a wide array of audiences on different topics. But few speaking opportunities are as exciting to me as this one, returning to the place that helped make me who I am, and the people to whom I owe so much.**

## **I. My story**

**My affection for Jackson Academy is shaped in part by the fact that my time here was interrupted. You see, I attended JA from kindergarten through sixth grade. But in seventh grade, I transferred to Jackson Prep. I can tell that those few years I spent there were challenging for me. That’s not to say that Jackson Prep is not a good school. In fact, it’s a great institution with a proud and distinguished history. Of course,**

**I have to say that because my father is a Jackson Prep alumnus, but it does happen to be true.**

**But I was floundering there, and that stemmed from the fact that I never felt like I belonged. I felt like I was in the wrong place, disconnected, and I simply wasn't growing and thriving. After some extensive discussion, cajoling, and arguing with my parents, I convinced them I would be happier here at JA. In my career at the highest levels of politics and government, I've worked on countless communication challenges -- but I can say with confidence that the single most critical and consequential moment of persuasion in my own life was when I talked my parents into letting me come home to JA.**

**So you could say I was something like the prodigal son of the Biblical parable. And like the prodigal son, I had been lost, but I was found.**

**For me, this was a turning point in my young life. I went from “floundering” to “flourishing.” I started public speaking, sports broadcasting, emceeing at pep rallies....around age 15 or so I just started running my mouth, and some people would argue I haven’t stopped since. And they’re probably not entirely wrong.**

**Even going beyond the classroom and campus life, JA allowed me to connect with like-minded people with whom I could pursue shared interests. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, my classmate Alan Taheri and I actually started our own computer business, building and selling custom PCs for customers. This fledgling entrepreneurial venture required setting up a business checking account, dealing with suppliers and clients, and meeting all the challenges of running a small business. This was back around 1999-2000, which the adults here will remember as the height of the late ‘90s tech bubble,**

**and Alan and I must have thought we were going to be the next great tech entrepreneurs, like Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak launching Apple Computers out of their garage. Well, our computer company wasn't the next Apple, and it ended up going the way of a lot of other tech ventures at the time. But we had fun and learned a lot, and for Alan at least, who now heads his own company, it was certainly a step along the road toward a lifetime of entrepreneurial success.**

**I cannot overemphasize how important that change was for me, and I believe it very much redirected the course of my young life. After graduation I moved to Oxford to attend Ole Miss. And then, since I was interested in politics and public policy, my path led me to Washington D.C., and now Dallas-Fort Worth. So while my career path took me away from Jackson, I'm blessed in that I have never felt rootless, because of the strong roots that I was able to cultivate right here in my hometown, and in particular, right here at JA.**

## **2. The lesson/Thematic development**

The author Sebastian Junger wrote a book titled [Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging](#), in which he notes that “human beings need three basic things in order to be content: they need to feel competent at what they do; they need to feel authentic in their lives; and they need to feel connected to others.”

Without even knowing it when I returned here at age 15, that’s exactly what I was seeking:

- a feeling of competence, through which I could develop a greater sense of confidence, purpose, and direction;
- a feeling of authenticity, of a clear sense of who I wanted to be; and...

- a feeling of connection, and of being in a place where I belonged and could flourish in the company of others like myself.

And at a time when I desperately, although blindly, was looking for those things – competence, connection, and authenticity – I found them here at Jackson Academy.

So, let's go down the list: Competence: At JA, I discovered I had some heretofore undiscovered skill at public speaking that could be developed, as I noted, which opened the doors to leadership opportunities like serving as senior class president. As I noted a moment ago, we started our own computer company. I landed an internship at Skytel that gave me my first taste of responsibility in an actual professional workplace. All of these experiences and so many other opportunities that JA provided allowed me to explore and

**develop real skills that would serve me well as I progressed into the larger world beyond these grounds.**

**And Authenticity. Developing these skills helped to nurture a sense of direction, leading me to understand better who and what I wanted to be in life. And while the things I learned through the classroom curriculum were important, that may have been secondary to the opportunities for leadership that I found both on and off this campus, and the nurturing of religious faith that I received in a warm and supportive environment. Upon leaving the nest, heading off for Oxford and then Washington, I felt extraordinarily well-prepared for the challenges and setbacks I knew I would face.**

**And Connection. I went from a place where I felt like a misfit to a place where I knew that I belonged, and where I could develop a sense of rootedness. And whenever I come back here today, it always feels like a homecoming. And while I**



**can point toward countless friends and colleagues that I have made at Ole Miss, in Washington D.C. and elsewhere, it's my friends and classmates from my years here at JA that I've turned to during the most challenging and trying times of my life.**

### **3. Application of the lesson/theme**

**Of course, by federal statute, every graduation speaker is required to dispense some advice to the graduates, so I suppose that's what I'll do here. In this case, I have a relatively simple task, because really, the best advice I can give you is to encourage you to build upon the foundation of values and experiences that JA has given you.**

**Reflect on the experiences and opportunities you've had here over the last several years; carry forward the lessons and values that have been imparted to you; and nourish and**

**nurture the deep sense of connection and community that you found here at JA. Because, while it's true that a small college preparatory school in Mississippi may not be "the real world," it is a microcosm of that world, and a wonderful way to prepare for the challenges and opportunities that the world will present to you in the years to come.**

**Living "a life of purpose and significance," as the JA mission emphasizes, is demanding, and we won't all live up to that ideal at all times. But we can strive toward that ideal.**

**Returning to my earlier theme, look for those areas where you can nurture your own sense of competence, by developing your God-given skills and talents, seeking out challenges and experiences that will allow you to flourish and thrive throughout your life. There's an old quote from President Teddy Roosevelt that my grandfather shared with me, and that I selected as my yearbook quote in senior year: "Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious**

**triumphs, even though checkered by failure...than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.”**

**That reminds us to take risks – intelligent, carefully considered risks, of course – and seek out new and challenging experiences and challenges that present opportunities for growth.**

**Strive to discover and live up to your authentic self, living in a way that is true to your values, your religious faith, and your obligations to your family, friends and community.**

**And strive to maintain a strong sense of connection with family, friends, your JA classmates and teachers, and everyone in your community who has supported you through the years. Be generous with your time and energy, and seek**

**out ways to help others and be of service to others, with no thought of how they might help you in return, because giving is its own reward.**

**I departed from JA 24 years ago, which, I hate to say, means I left here a quarter century ago. But I note with joy and with pride that, while JA has certainly grown and evolved over that time period, one thing that hasn't changed are those fundamental values that serve as the foundation of this school's educational mission, which is leading young people into adulthood by educating the whole person. At a school like Jackson Academy, you're not just a number. And you're more than a test score. And you are more than whatever future career path you will pursue. We should all be grateful for the opportunity we've had to attend a school that recognizes that, because it's a blessing that so many people do not receive.**

**Too often, the framing we see around schooling focuses on preparing you to be part of the workforce – and let's face it, that is, indeed, very important. But you're not just a cog in the employment machine. You're someone's child, part of a family, you belong to a community, and one day you'll likely have spouses and children of your own. And the type of development you get at an institution like JA – where they educate the whole person – is invaluable preparation for all of those roles that you will play, and the contributions you will make. Be grateful for what you have received, and do all you can to repay that debt in the years to come.**

**Thank you once again for this honor today, and God bless you all.**