

## **The Berkeley Institute Class of 2020**

**Graduation Commencement Speech** by *Ryan Robinson Perinchief* on 29 June 2020

Good morning Berkeley family, and huge congrats to the Berkeley Institute Class of 2020.

When I was first asked to deliver the 2020 Graduation speech a few weeks ago, I was honoured and happy as I always am to get the chance to engage with you all as fellow young people and give back to my high school.

But also, well truthfully, I was devastated and anxious at the idea of delivering words of encouragement in a time like this.

- What on earth could I possibly say to a group of high school students who are graduating while the world literally is burning down around them?
- How do you motivate, a generation that feels like they have nothing to look forward to and is bearing witness to so much chaos, so much anxiety, so much uncertainty?
- How do you guide and inspire a group of graduates to “keep the end in view”, when the entire world seems to have lost its way.

In a typical year, its completely okay for a graduation speech to be only about happiness, and celebration, this is a time where some inspirational figure gets up on stage and says ‘the world is your oyster, it’s only up from here.’

But the simple reality for graduates in 2020 is that there will be some tough days ahead, and a lot of you have some work to do if you’re going to be ready for life beyond Berkeley Institute as things get even tougher.

In many respects, no one could have predicted that your final year of high school would be upended by a global pandemic, a world in protest, and an unstable economic future.

On the other hand, I’ve done some of my research on you guys. The Class of 2020. And although I don’t know each of you individually, I do know enough about you to know that a lot of you weren’t pulling your own weight before this pandemic. Some of you got here today by the skin of your teeth. You know who you are!

I will tell you now, for those of you with that mentality, it is not going to work.

In Bermuda and around the world, many people were already experiencing difficulty before 2020. Lord knows we were all happy to see 2019 come to an end, that was a rough year too. Without a doubt after looking at half of this year, we know that if it was hard before, it will definitely be a challenge going forward.

The class of 2020 is graduating into chaos.

And the standards which you may have slipped past today wont only be there tomorrow in the real world, in many ways, they will be higher.

Some things will be different entirely. One of the things this pandemic has exposed is that a lot of things we thought we had control over will need to be completely reimaged.

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Why do I say that?

According to academics who study Millennials and Generation Z, The coronavirus pandemic is the biggest cultural event since World War II,”

The researchers are saying, “Either we will end up with a generation that is far more resilient than earlier generations, or basically we will have a generation that doesn’t really care about anything at all”.

We need you to know, if nobody tells you I will – you are needed. You are valued. You have something unique that you can bring to this world.

And as you enter into a new phase in your life, you’ll have to find the motivation to pull your socks up and adapt, or risk getting left behind.

So how do we maintain resilience when everything is crashing down? How do we find hope when Graduations have been cancelled and college placements are uncertain?

How do we stay focused and optimistic, when all that we were looking forward to, appears to have been taken away in front of our very eyes.

Well I say, you must all look inside of yourself. And so I have three key things I want you to take away, as you celebrate this day and navigate the next phase in your life.

The first thing I’ll say you must do, is take this time to get to know yourself.

### **Know Yourself**

A quote by a psychologist examining the effects of the last big chaotic event like this says, “It is an ironic habit of human beings to run *faster* when they have lost their way.”

If we think back to the start of Covid-19 a few months ago, we can probably remember some of the panic that ensued. Lots of people booked plane tickets and rushed back home from school at a moments notice, social media and Twitter were in shambles with all sorts of arguing and rushing around, and somewhere along the way, people started fighting over toilet paper.

And while all that was happening ‘out there’, we started to see a lot of that here with you guys, too. The second some of the shelter in place restrictions were lifted, we saw all sorts of house parties and drinking and partying, and fighting, like it was the end of the world.

You see, in times of anxiety, fear and loneliness take over, many of us feel the need to be comforted, accepted, secure. Some of us figure, “what’s the point”, and so we lose our values and our focus. We throw out all the rules and standards we had set for ourselves. We forget about all the progress we’ve made before all of the uncertainty and we end up giving up at the very moment when we need to be more focused than ever before. And that is the trap.

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One of the best opportunities about living in a time like this, is that it gives us a chance to become aware of ourselves. Think about what happens to your iPhone when you have too many apps open, or your laptop when you have too many documents open. Things crash in order to give itself a moment to recalibrate and start fresh.

So if you're feeling anxious, uncertain, or depleted, I want you to take a moment to look inside yourself, and do that too.

Some of you have had your further studies postponed, some of you will be moved virtually, some of you have had to give up opportunities in light of the uncertainty, and some of you were unsure about what was next even before all this mess.

So if there's anything you do, while you sit and wait for whatever comes next, I urge you: take this time to get to know yourself. Do not sacrifice long term opportunity for short term comforts in the heat of this moment.

For me, that meant re-examining what's important to me. For you it may be different! Maybe after all of this, you've found that there are some friends that weren't really good for you. It's perfectly okay to have enjoyed your time with them while it lasted, and understanding that everything is in your life for a reason and a season. Maybe some of them need to be cut. Maybe some things need to fall back so that you can focus on other priorities.

From another standpoint, it could be as simple as reading a book, emailing someone to find out about a particular field you might be interested in, or volunteering for something you are passionate about. Summer is already pretty much cancelled – there's no pressure to go to all the parties, and get caught up in the hype. Take time to compose yourself for whatever you decide comes next.

Times like this call for us to all be the centre of strength within ourselves. People who can be the calm in the storm. Because sometimes it just takes just one person who exercises an inner strength and knowledge of self that calms the panic in everyone else.

You ever have that friend in the group that doesn't talk much, but is sort of like the equalizer? You could be arguing or fighting or whatever and they're just there, all composed, bringing a sense of calm to everyone else?

Be that person. Know yourself so that any challenge that comes your way, whether its covid, or unemployment, or depression, or even in times where you're letting lose and enjoying yourself – you stay true to who you are and you know what standards you have chosen to uphold for you.

The second thing I want you to do is:

### **Be Yourself and Celebrate Yourself**

Keep in mind that even though we may be celebrating on this particular graduation day, a graduation is not just a celebration of one particular moment in time. A graduation is

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the culmination, it's the build up of all the years before this. All the work you put in learning about yourself, your academic journey, and your personal growth. The challenges you've overcome, the experiences you've had before this, and yes – even the work you've put in over the past few months.

Take this time to enjoy this moment.

I was speaking to some of you in the midst of the lockdown to get an idea of how you were coping.

For some of you it was easy, and you were happy to be not have to put on your uniforms, get on the bus and come to school. For others, it was a bit more challenging. I know that some of you didn't have internet or computers, for some of you, school was your peaceful or safe place. Some of you even had to leave your houses for a bit just to go to the park to get work done.

I had some of these same challenges. Three months ago I was in Birmingham in the UK, doing the Legal Practice Course which is the professional training you have to do after you complete a Bachelor of Laws.

But when the shelves started to get empty and school shut down in the UK, I returned home in a matter of days. I had to quarantine for two weeks and as soon as that ended, the island was put on lockdown. And all the while, I was waking up to do virtual classes at 5am.

It's a weird time, and its perfectly okay to experience all sorts of emotions, confusion, depression, anxiousness, its okay to not be okay sometimes. There were days where I skipped class and slept, there were times when I didn't do anything but eat. But we're here. We all had to struggle, take a minute, adapt, and press onward.

So class of 2020, I salute you. For your resilience, for going the extra mile, for doing whatever you had to do to adapt, change, and go above and beyond in order to get here. Although you may not be able to walk across the stage, that doesn't by any means diminish the hard work and sacrifice you've put in to be able to glance across this screen today.

Graduating high school is no small achievement on a good day. And recent events have thrown nothing but curveball after curveball. So take the time out to celebrate yourselves and the cumulative hurdles that you had to overcome to get here today, despite the fact that you may not be having the big celebration you were originally looking forward to.

### **Dare to Create**

The final thing I want to encourage you to do, in the spirit of adapting, and celebrating, and knowing yourself, is to create something.

Yes, dare to create.

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You see, in many ways before this, people seemed to think was a certain 'formula' that everyone was expected to follow which we defined as 'success'. We'll look at it now: the world done got up and fell apart.

I think of my own mother. Someone who spent so much of her life getting up early and working in a corporate profession, staying late when she didn't have to, coming home at 6 and 7pm on repeat. Well after working year after year at the same job, in the midst of the pandemic she received a call one day with no warning to say that she was being made redundant. Just like that – after taking only 2 sick days in 8 years, they told her 'don't even bother coming in to collect your personal items, we'll pack them up for you.'

And just like that, the façade was shattered. She has since realised, that with all her experience and expertise," I'm not doing that again." I'm going to use my skills and create something for me.

That is the new world of innovation, instability, and adaptability - and something young people are particularly equipped to do.

We know all the negative things they say about this generation – we're lost, we have no motivation to do anything, we take everything for granted. And if we hadn't heard it before, we're certainly hearing it now as people reminisce on calmer times from the past.

But the truth is, when I think about this graduating class, I see something different.

You are graduating in 2020, which means all of you were born in the early 2000s. You were the first age groups to be born into social media and mass information. You came of age during the fallout of a terrible economic recession. You are the first ones to grow up not knowing a Bermuda in which gun and gang violence don't exist. And now, you will graduate from high school into an uncertain future.

It's just another day in the life for Generation Z: You're one of the most adaptable, resilient, most innovative, active generations we have ever seen. And when the going gets tough, the young get creative.

Now is not the time to shy away or sit in self-pity. Because one day, the world will turn a page. The Tik-Toks will get boring, they already have, the curfew will be lifted, and it will be a rare chance for us to build the world again. Either way, Now is a time to be bolder than ever. Now is the time to create something new.

I think of other students like my cousin – Isra Sharrieff-Furbert, who graduated from Berkeley in 2018 and initially started down that expected path of going off to school and studying economics. Within two months, Isra realised that it wasn't what she wanted to do. It wasn't her passion. She wanted to create. So she came back; she followed her path. And in the midst of this whole pandemic she has recently started her own carpentry business. Yes, a carpenter!

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I think of current graduates, like Jaiden Furbert Jacobs and Micah Richardson who decided to form groups like Greenteam and Ocean 441, to clean up beaches and parks and engage in activities where they can have fun and do something for the community at the same time.

Then, I think of students who maybe were not so well-positioned from the start, but used the cards they were dealt to turn their pain into purpose.

I think of students like Malay Robinson – someone who you can look at and know, through her maturity, that she has not had an easy road. And yet she dares to create joy every day.

I'm thinking of students like 19 year old Sierra Brangman – a Berkeley graduate who grew up in foster care from 5 months old to 18 years old, had a rough ride in high school, yet still had the courage to use her small voice to speak out for justice and advocate for mental health when one of your classmates who should be graduating with all of you today, Kirsta Simons, tragically committed suicide last year.

Not only did these students dare to create, they dared to be passionate. They dared to be activists and to be a part of something greater than themselves, even when *their* world was falling down around them.

Why would I mentioned something so serious and hard hitting in a graduation speech, you may ask. Because times like these call for honesty. and courage. and resolve. and creativity.

These are the types of things we think of when we remember Berkeleyites like the great late Dr. Eva Hodgson who passed away one month ago today – an advocate who dared to speak the truth, and fight for a better and fairer world; or Kristin White, who is currently leading out the Social Justice Bermuda movement, or Dr. Clifford Maxwell, former Principal of Berkeley who fought against desegregation.

Don't let anyone tell you *you* have to follow a certain path! It wasn't true before covid-19, and if anyone bought into that lie before, they certainly can't sell it to you now - because just about everything has been re-set!

It doesn't matter whether you came from a two-parent household, a one parent household or a no parent household. It doesn't matter whether you come with PTSD, ADHD or just plain old struggle. You come from strength. You were born to create. Don't ever sell yourselves short by being mediocre. And so in that same spirit, I want you to remember these words and affirm yourselves:

"I am bold. I am brilliant. I have something to contribute to this world. And no matter how I feel at any one moment, no matter what's going on around me, I have the power within me to create."

Every individual, every generation has its own unique struggles and experiences which define who they are. The good experiences, and the bad experiences come together to

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meet the power of our minds and opportunity, and allow us the unique chance to define ourselves, and create something meaningful out of our own struggles. We have the power to make things happen, in spite of and because of, the things that happen to us. And these next few years will be a defining moment not only for you, but for the Bermuda that you will grow up in, and work in, and live in, and create. And that is the point that I want to make to you, class of 2020.

And so as we face this current big global crisis we remember the last big defining moment: out of the ashes of World War II, countries came together to form the UN - an organization to serve as a platform for cooperation, dialogue, and bringing the world closer together.

There is a lot of opportunity in these ashes, here.

And so, Class of 2020, as you celebrate this achievement today, as you ponder your futures and navigate all its uncertainty, as you go off and find your places in this world, I want each and every one of you to consider what you can create.

You are needed. You are valued. You have something unique that you can bring to this world.

Whether its speaking up to create a fairer, better world from the ashes that have been left in the wake of a pandemic, or creating something from your own confusion as you graduate from Berkeley here today, dare to do something that sets you up for a future you can be passionate about. One that you can create.

Berkeley Institute Graduates of 2020, you do not have to fall victim to the cards you were dealt. And although things are a bit weird right now, know that you have the power to create the future if you remain adaptable and focused, and are prepared to sacrifice short term pleasure for long term opportunities and rewards.

Know yourself. Celebrate yourself. Dare to create.

And so I say it again as you repeat it with me to yourselves:

**I am bold. I am brilliant. I have something to contribute to this world. And no matter how I feel at any one moment, no matter what's going on around me, I have the power within me to create.**

We are proud of you. We celebrate you and your struggles. We celebrate your resilience, your strength, your courage and your energy. And rest assured, with all that's going on today, know that at some point in the future, everyone will look back and remember the strength, the resilience, the great things that created out of the chaos, that was, the Class of 2020. And when you come back one day 'as they say oft as we can we come back again to Berkeley to deliver your graduation speech,' you will say, I am from the class that graduated from the Berkeley Institute in the year two thousand and twenty - and everyone will know what that meant.

*Respice Finem.*