

## **BTSN Remarks 2017 by Head of School Jennifer Danish**

Welcome to Back-to School Night! It has been a great start to this new school year. I want to extend a special welcome to our new families. We are so honored and delighted that you chose Grace.

We hope that tonight will be a chance all of you to get a fuller glimpse into the life of your child as a Grace student. This evening is our invitation to collaborate with us on the next great step in your child's education. That requires us to know each other, to trust one another, and to build a bridge between their life at school and their life at home.

As I was considering what I wanted to share with all of you this evening, it dawned on me that next week my husband and I will attend our 19<sup>nd</sup> and last Back to School Night at our daughter's high school. Over the years of attending these evenings for my two children, I have noticed how much I enjoy hearing from teachers who have guided and nurtured them in school. And while I have listened with intent to them speak about what would be covered, what would be taught, and how they will assess, I often wanted to ask about some of the social and emotional skills and lessons my child might gain as well. For example, would they learn about forgiveness, how to be a good and caring friend, how to speak up when something is not right? Would they be given counsel on facing failure, on learning from mistakes?

In just a moment, you will make your way down the hall and hear about the classroom and the studies and the routines of this new grade your child has entered. And you will get a sense of the expert teachers that will teach your child so very much. But I want to be sure I share with you some of what you won't see as you sit at your child's desk or table.

When you chose Grace for your child, there was likely some sense that it would offer some of the social-emotional skills that would help them to lead a happy and productive life beyond these early years of school. After many years as an admission officer in DC, I can verify that the most often identified trait parents seek in a school for their child is a place that will nurture them and appreciate who they are, a place where they will be happy.

I have a special vantage point as Head of School both literally with where I sit just beyond our early childhood playground and figuratively as chief administrator at

Grace. Each morning, I may witness a tearful goodbye between you and your child that quickly evolves into joyful play with friends and teachers. I can peek out my window and see two or three friends navigating an exciting game. And often I watch as our teachers kneel down to talk eye to eye with a student who is upset or worried or unsure what to do next. Students also pass through the hall by my office on their way in and out of the building and sometimes they argue or have a conflict. Other times they are sharing a joke, bubbling over with a discovery from their time outside, or shedding a few tears because something did not go as planned.

It is a privilege to hear and see these small moments of our students' day because many of these interactions are the very ones that are helping them to grow and flourish as young people. And here at Grace, they are guided by thoughtful, wise, patient, and graceful teachers and administrators who know they need support, boundaries on occasion, and modeling. Indeed I think these small moments and the impact that have on the growth of your children – these are what make our school a place where students belong, where that can be seen for who they are. A place where they can grow into the person they are meant to be. And as an Episcopal School, this attention to the development of the self and of the spirit is core to what we believe is our calling.

On Sunday night, I received an email from a Grace graduate. I was very happy to receive this note and as is often the case, it was from the student I would have least expected to write. In the note, he brimmed with excitement about his new school and new friends. I was not at Grace when he came from a school where he had not felt like he belonged. His transition to Grace also took time. What pleased me most about the note was his joy – his satisfaction at mastering a new environment. He truly grew at Grace – I saw it unfold in just the one year I had with him.

Grace is a place that honors the social and emotional growth of young children. As you spend time in your child's class tonight, please know that we are considering their head and their heart – that we value them for who they are. And know that each of us feels a responsibility when they arrive each day to add to the moments that are propelling them towards a life of meaning and purpose beyond Grace.

Thank you for being here tonight. This is going to be a wonderful year!