

Theme:

Appreciate. Celebrate. Aspire.

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Good morning Mdm Ong, principal of GRPS, guests, parents, teachers and students. Thank you for inviting me to this year's Speech Day.

I am an alumnus. I was a student from 1995-2000. My form teachers in P5 and P6 were Mrs Paul Tay and Ms Peh. I believe they are still teaching here. My principal was Mrs Daisy Yip.

For a bit of perspective of how senior I am - when I was in GRPS, Bukit Panjang Plaza had a bowling alley and McDonald's was at Bangkit Road where Kim San Leng coffee shop is now. We played block catching and football at void decks for fun, apart from trading pokemon cards. Times have changed tremendously but some things stay the same, and perhaps they should.

I am here to give a speech but I will share short stories instead. Following the theme for today, I hope you can draw valuable lessons about appreciation, celebration and aspiration from these short stories. I'll begin.

First - appreciation. After leaving GRPS, I went to RI and then RJC. Did I want to go to RI? No. RJC? No. How and why did I end up there? When others would be overjoyed to receive a PSLE score eligible for entry into the premier school on this island, I was scared. I was worried. Why? Coming from a very humble background, I was afraid- how am I going to make friends with people from better economic backgrounds? What am I going to say when they ask me what car my father drives? What am I going to do when I cannot afford to join them for lunch at McDonald's? I spent my whole December worried that I could enter RI. Can you believe that?

My father, never finished sec 3. He was a pest controller. He never had the chance to go to a polytechnic, JC or university. As unqualified as he was, he had a dream. He wanted his children to be in better places than him. He somehow managed to convince me that all my fears were actually made up realities in my mind. They were not real and yet they were holding me back; I should give myself a chance. My time in RI turned out to be the best years of my life and those years became the platform for future successes.

My father might be poor but his zeal gave me courage. I am eternally appreciative of his enthusiasm and guidance. So students, take the time to think about that one person in your life who makes you brave- who makes you dare to dream big. Spend more time with him or her and show your appreciation.

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On celebration - we celebrate events to honour and glorify its importance as well as significance in our lives. To be honest, I do not enjoy big celebrations in general. I prefer small ones. Coming from healthcare, this sharing would seem incomplete without stories from the hospital.

So, in my 1st year as a doctor, there was a very pleasant patient who was admitted into the hospital for breathlessness. He was elderly and came from a nursing home for the aged. It means, he doesn't stay with his family, if he even had one. Despite being on high flow oxygen, he could still afford daily smiles and greetings to the nurses and doctors. What was curious was he never had any visitors. We tried to track his family for a few days and eventually with help from social workers, we managed to contact his only daughter. However, the daughter refused to visit him. I knew what would delight this old man would be to see his daughter. I spent some time daily trying to convince his daughter to come to the hospital and eventually I succeeded. The phrase "terminal cancer" seems to trigger the best in people, and I watched with immense gratification as they embraced. Although as physicians, we can not yet celebrate a miracle cure for cancer, even in the inevitable face of death, there will be reasons to celebrate the little things in life.

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On aspiration - Albert Einstein once said "imagination is more powerful than knowledge". I would like to add to that quote. "Aspiration is more powerful than imagination". What are your aims? What are your ambitions? Ask yourselves - why are you studying so hard? What are you burning midnight oil for? What are the reasons for all your effort and toil? Wait- are reasons enough? Or do you need something more. Something bigger. Something that will propel you to be your greatest. An aspiration. An ambition. If you are doing your revisions, memorising lines, diagrams just to pass exams, you are getting left behind. But, it is not too late.

During one of my many shifts at the dormitories, I met Hossen. He was 33 years old, worked as a construction worker and hailed from Bangladesh. He had 1 child, who was born 2 years ago, a beautiful baby girl whom he had never met since birth because he cannot return due to the pandemic. In the last 1 year, Hossen's mother passed away unexpectedly. He could not attend the funeral. Hossen had an Engineering degree. But he chose to work as a welder because the work in Singapore pays better, even though he was obviously overqualified. He wanted to save his hard-earned money and hopefully open a grocery shop back home to give his family a better life. He took me through his vivid dreams to have a store, selling a plethora of spices, canned drinks, dried vegetables and perhaps during big festivities, some traditional homemade cookies.

Here is a man, who left his loved ones behind, sacrificed precious time with his growing child, risked being absent when his family members breathed their last, and humbled himself to take on menial jobs - all in order to pursue his aspiration, which is crystal clear in his mind.

Greenridgeans, are your own aspirations clear in your head? Or are they fluffy daydreams for entertainment, to fool no other but your own selves? Hossen may be sitting at the back of lorries, or having his lunch by the roadside - but do we even have a fraction of his ambition?

I hope we can all do some self-reflection later today about the need to appreciate all the positive people in our lives as well as celebrate the little joys and successes in life. Do not be afraid to have big aspirations, remember to pursue them, and don't get comfortable for too long.

Thank you.