



ST. JOHN'S PREP

SJP NHS Induction 2022-2023 Speech Declan Foley '11

Greetings, thanks, and congratulations to the inductees of the National Honor Society, and welcome to the St. John's Prep Chapter. To the inductees, their family and friends, faculty and staff, and everyone else present with us here today – I extend you all a warm welcome and thank you for taking the time to pause from your lives to elevate those in front of us. To the students, I recognize the aggregate effort over several years that it took for each of you to cross the threshold tonight and I want to acknowledge the distinction that you will carry on your suit-jacket lapel for years to come. Symbolized in a tiny metallic pin, you signal to the wider community your excellence in the four pillars of scholarship, service, leadership, and character. Congratulations.

I'm stuck on that fourth pillar, character, as it's the trait that I contend is hardest for you to define at this point in your lives. The other three are not so hard. You gave back to your community in some way, and you have dutifully recorded the timesheet of service hours on your application. You all participate in different activities where you have some title, inherently distinguishing you from your peers. All these numbers and titles we can name, we can hold on to, we can put on a resume. You've distinguished yourselves in the classroom and I would bet very real dollars that, if asked, each of you would know your

exact GPA before being able to write your correct zip code on a mail envelope. And yet, character can often be the most elusive pillar of NHS for you to define: you had to request that others - faculty and staff you felt close to - account for who you are, and it's clear they endorsed you. There is no numerical metric for good character in life, colleges do not admit or decline you for your Character Point Average when you apply to school, and yet we all know it when we see it, and we know when we see the absence of it. We know what it means when someone is "acting out of character," and we know the weight of a name - it is, after all, the first thing you were given in this world. You could argue character was the only portion of the application that you did not directly control, and yet I contend the exact opposite: every little decision you make contributes to a larger whole, and character is precisely where the repeated, often unseen and yet most important work is done. I want my message to you tonight to be loud and clear: small decisions of character create a pattern, and a pattern makes a person. Strip away all numerical accolades, and character is where the work of becoming human is achieved. Character is the legacy you leave as you weave through the world.

So, who am I to you? First, I'm a product of your environment, a member of the Class of 2011. I was you. I sat in the streetside cafeteria every day, talking about struggling through Chemistry class or celebrating a rugby win with my buddies. I had six minutes to hoof it from building to building in the pouring rain to make it on time just to practice my trigonometry, sitting there soaking wet. I led Eagles Wings groups, I slept on X's floor on my overnight Sophomore Retreat, and I got cut from my two favorite sports freshman year and learned how to play two new ones. And yet, while I was you not long

ago, I no longer am. I no longer play sports here, but coach two of them. When it rains, I bring an umbrella. I've walked a little further down the road from you, and I can leave some clues to anyone on the path behind me. Second, in a class that included future NBAer Pat Connoughton and NHLer Colin Blackwell, I was the perfectly average Declan Foley. But, average is not bad; average is my most useful School Counselor skill, it allows me to relate to the majority of your experiences. I know what many of you shoulder, I know some of the burdens you quietly carry around with you each day, that which often gets overlooked by others. I spend Friday nights and weekends watching you play the sports you love, I laugh at your quips in the theater, I admire when you introduce your date to me at proms with pride, and I will have a full heart when you will eventually walk across the graduation stage.

The message to you tonight is simple: everything matters. My senior year in English, Mr. Pawlyk tasked us with reading a book by that title, and it created the perspective I have today. In the book, facing the end of the world, the main character is given a chance to redo his life, and can pick from an infinite number of possibilities. Many of those lives are perfect ones without pain and suffering, and yet he chooses to relive his imperfect one, trying to be a better version of himself. From this difficulty comes his realization: *"Everything ends, and Everything matters. Everything matters not in spite of the end of you and all that you love, but because of it. Everything is all you've got...and after Everything is nothing. So you were wise to welcome Everything, the good and the bad alike, and cling to it all. Gather it in. Seek the meaning in sorrow and don't ever turn away, not once, from here until the end."*

Let's make it about you: It's 6am, and your parent opens the door and the hall light hits your eyes, and they nudge your shoulder telling you to wake up, to hustle, and that you're certainly not going to be the reason you're late to pick up your carpool buddies. You didn't plug in your iPad, and you start to analyze your day on how much you'll need it. You sit in five, hour-long classes, moving from one to the next with muscle memory, no longer needing those Veracross schedules as your Ipad background. You hear the bell chime at 2:34, only to chip away at the digital pile of Canvas notifications for an hour before practice, exhaust yourself until 6:30pm, drive back home in the dark in ten-degree February rawness, you do your basic human functions of showering and fueling, only to check your BeReels and finish off that homework you didn't get to, shutting your light off at 11pm. And you may wonder, as any normal teenager would, with such a schedule, why on God's green earth does this matter? My answer for you: everything matters, and what matters most is how you decide to proceed, and who you want to be known for after.

Finding the answer to that question comes when asking yourself another: What do you love? When it comes to Love, as Fr. Pedro Arrupe said, what will get you out of bed in the morning, and what do you do with your evenings? How do you spend your weekends, your little pockets of time to yourself? What breaks your heart and how do you deal with that? What amazes you with joy and gratitude? All of that is Love, the guiding principle that imbues every moment with meaning if you let it, to inspire in you the idea that every single little ordinary thing that you do in this life matters.

Figuring out what you love unlocks your world. All of a sudden, you keep your eyes wide open to experiences you would have shut down before. That openness allows

you to be proud to be yourself, to surround yourself with those that truly see you for your gifts, and to seek out similarities in those you thought were different from you. Friction becomes a place of opportunity rather than division, challenges are approached with eagerness and grit rather than seeking the path of least resistance. You realize there are things that are hard in life, but you realize you can do hard things if you knuckle down and dig your heels in. You begin to reflect on how you treat your friends, family, and teachers because you will begin to see them for their patterns, their true person, and you will understand yourself to be as much of a work in progress as any of us. Figuring out what you love allows you to be happy irrespective of profession or paycheck, things that are integral in life, but less so than who you are as you earn these positions and pay. Your character, then, emerges when you shed the skin of what is cool and what is not; when you realize every little decision you make, every little conversation you have with someone else, every time you decide to take the charitable understanding of a situation; all of it occurs because this decision to love everything affords you the ability to see worth in the good, and the hard.

To close us, let me put it as simply as I can. On March 11th, my best friend from St. John's is getting married, and he has asked me to be his best man. When I'm holding the microphone, looking out at him, his new wife, family and friends - all waiting, smiling, and eager to hear the best man's address - I will not be able to remember his GPA, and I will not be able to recite his resume. At the moment when it matters the most for him, none of that will be with us in the room. But I will be able to look him in the eye, and I fully expect my heart to well with warmth thinking of how he was a gentle listener to me, how he

treated everyone he met with respect, and how he always, unrelentingly, consistently to this day brings out the best version of me when it is hardest for me to do so myself. I love a lot about my time at St. John's, but what I love most is knowing my friends turned into people of character, and it's that fact that wakes me up every single day.

Remember, I was average! But, you, by virtue of sitting here in the room tonight, surpass average. I am giving you a head start that took me much longer to figure out, and so I ask the inductees this: every time you look at that lapel-pin, let yourself be reminded of the idea that everything matters, through thick and thin. It is now time to figure out what you love, what you are made of, who you want to be, and how you want to be a person of character in the world. The world needs more of you, and you are right where you need to be to do the good it desires.

Thank you, congratulations, and welcome to the National Honor Society at St. John's Prep.