

**ETHS 2018 Commencement Speech**  
*June 3, 2018*

**Stephen H. Hagerty**

“Courage, Empathy, Persistence and Humor”

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Hi. I'm Steve Hagerty – the Commencement Speaker some of you didn't want.

When I was asked a month ago to speak before one of the finest and most remarkable high schools in America, I didn't hesitate to accept. Although, to be honest, I did have a fleeting thought that someone else must have cancelled. Who could it have been? Lena Waithe? Meghan Towhey? No matter, I wasn't going to pass up the invitation to speak to 865 amazing students who are already changing the world. More on that in a minute.

Last week, my excitement dimmed after I read the editorial in the Evanstonian, titled, "Graduation Needs a Wildkit, not Mayor Hagerty." To paraphrase, the article went something like this:

*"Mayor Hagerty is not a real Evanstonian. He didn't grow up here. He didn't graduate from*

*ETHS. His kids don't go to school here. He has no legacy in Evanston. He has a misguided perception of the community. And he's barely our Mayor, as he only won by 115 votes."*

In light of these statements, I chose to rewrite my speech. Today, I'd like to tell four stories, share what I think it means to be an Evanstonian and by extension a Wildkit, and leave you with some concluding remarks. If you're looking for the light-hearted speech with the funny jokes, I'll post that one online.

### **The first story is about courage.**

We all need to have courage to stand up against what is wrong. When I was in high school, I saw that courage on display by Erin Geddes. Erin was a fierce and tenacious field hockey player. She was raised by a single parent. She had a strong sense of right versus wrong.

Senior year, I was the goalie on the girls' field hockey team. Yes, the only boy on the girls' team. I took a lot of ribbing from the football players in the locker room; the same football players I played with my junior year. I could handle and even enjoyed the good natured back and forth with my peers. What

was more difficult was the heckling from the parents. During one particular game against a state powerhouse, two dads heckled me non-stop. "You're a loser!" "Why don't you play a boys' sport?" "If you were my son, I'd disown you!"

After the 1-0 loss, the dads heckled me all the way to the bus. Erin Geddes, hearing the taunts all game long, finally had enough. She jumped off the bus, got in the fathers' faces, and I watched this 17-year-old girl give it to two grown men in their 40s. I can't repeat what Erin said, but I can tell you her courage to stick up for another person touched me deeply. Over the years, there are a lot of peoples' names you'll forget, but you'll never forget those who stick up for you.

I'll consider a significant part of my life's goals fulfilled if someone remembers my name for the same reason I will always remember Erin Geddes.

As an aside and not surprisingly, Erin graduated from Attleboro High School and went on to serve our country in the military.

The second story is about **empathy**.

Three weeks ago, I was in the grocery store on a Sunday evening. There was an older woman by the soup and salad bar. She looked down on her luck. She sat there for at least 10 minutes and ate soup from several of the cauldrons. This did not go unnoticed by other customers and staff. Off in the distance I saw a man reach into his wallet and take out a \$20 bill. He walked up to the woman and said, "I just found this on the floor. Is it yours?" The woman replied, "No." And the man said, "I don't need it, so I'd like you to have it."

I don't know if the \$20 made a difference for that woman that evening, but I know that that man showed a level of compassion brought about because his eyes are open to the world

The third story is about **persistence**.

When I was a junior in high school, I set my sights on attending Cornell University. My grades were good. I had taken a few AP classes. And I was involved in many extracurricular activities. My problem was that I could not master the SAT. Literally, I took it 4 times. My mom signed me up for the Stanley Kaplan prep course, which advertised that if your scores didn't improve by X points, you could take it again for free. I took that course three

times. If the SAT is to predict future success, then my future looked bleak.

Given my scores, my mom suggested that I apply to 17 colleges—and this was before online applications; fortunately the application fees were a lot less than they are today. She also encouraged me to visit as many schools as possible; believing that if they met me, they'd admit me. So I did.

My parents couldn't afford to drop their jobs to accompany me, so I drove the family station wagon, by myself, and visited colleges on the East Coast, where I grew up. Syracuse was memorable because after meeting with the admissions officer, she basically said, "Don't bother applying. Your SAT scores are too low." But I applied anyway.

And, despite what the admissions officer said, Syracuse did admit me; not into the major I wanted, but that was okay, because I had plans to go to Cornell. You see, Cornell sent me a rejection letter but it wasn't the normal kind of rejection letter. This one was personalized. To paraphrase, it said, "Dear Steve, we really like you. We'd like you to go to another college, take these classes - and they listed the specific classes for me to take - and then reapply to Cornell." So, you know what, I did? I went to

Syracuse. I took the classes Cornell suggested. I reapplied. And I got rejected again!

So, what does this story have to do with persistence? The fact is, sometimes you will persist and not get what you want, at least not right away. The world is full of broken dreams. But if you surround yourself with people that inspire you, people that challenge you, people that care about you, you will be amazed at what you can accomplish.

The final story is about the importance of **humor and laughter**. So here's a joke:

Why couldn't the toilet paper cross the road? It got stuck in a crack.

It feels good to laugh. We often remember when we laugh. I remember when my 10 year old told me this joke. We were in the hallway. We associate many positive times in our lives with laughter. I know the world and society, particularly at this point in time, can seem like a big, overwhelming, and downright frightening place. Laughing releases the endorphins which makes it all seem a little better. Look for opportunities to laugh and make others laugh.

I share these stories because we all have a life story. Your parents have a life story, individually and together. Collectively, those life stories reveal the essence of who we each are and how we ended up where we are. The fact is our life stories are more than our skin color, our status in life, our bank account, our sexual orientation, or our title. Our life story reflects a journey—our journey and the journey of our ancestors before us. Where we are today is not where we were yesterday nor will it be where we are tomorrow.

We are about our values; about what we stand for, and how we treat one another. Character matters.

We're living in a world that so easily wants to label each of us. Don't fall prey to the easy way out. Anyone can use divisive rhetoric. Anyone can apply labels. What's hard but necessary is getting to know other people without placing a judgment on them. It's only then that you can change the minds and perspectives of others or alter your own.

I was and am so excited to be your speaker today because I and all the parents, teachers, guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and others in this arena have witnessed you – the graduating

class - collectively show courage and empathy and persistence over the last four years.

I know you stand for social justice. I saw it when you spoke out against the President's immigration policies and the need to change our own local ordinances around juvenile arrests.

I know you stand for gender equality. I saw it when you marched with your moms, sisters, grandmothers, aunts and friends. I know there are a lot of nasty woman in this arena!

I know you stand for black lives matter. I saw it when you pushed for reforms that are now occurring in our community.

I know you stand for freedom of speech. I saw it when you supported your athletes and took a knee.

I know you have personally been touched and are outraged by gun violence in our community and our country. I saw it when you walked out of school and rallied at Lazier Field calling on Congress to enact sensible gun control laws.

I know you stand for freedom of the press. I saw it when you stood strong against concerns of censorship from the Administration.

I know you stand for love and acceptance. I saw it when you acted on Dr. Witherspoon's words after the 2016 election, urging you "to be kind and caring to one another. Redouble your support for one another. And even though we cannot always control what is going on in the larger world around us, we can define our own school, our own community."

I know you're impatient. And I know all of us in this arena are glad you're impatient, because we need real changes in this world, and you're the generation to bring them. You are already leading.

I know you're ready to join the alumni of this school—some of whom I'm sure will be future commencement speakers—to make a difference in the world in whatever field you pursue.

In closing, I'm not worried about you being ready for the world. I know ETHS has prepared all of you – whether you return to Evanston or settle in another community – to be citizens of the world. I worry if the world is ready for you.

Congratulations, Wildkits. Go forth and show courage and empathy and persistence, don't forget to laugh along the way, and remember T'Challa's challenge at the end of the Black Panther movie.

"Now more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth; more connects us than divides us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe."

My friends, we are one single tribe. We are human kind. And we are so so fortunate that this world now includes 865 new graduates from one of the finest high schools in America.

Congratulations, Wildkits! It has been my honor to be in your presence this morning.