

2023 Salutatorian Speech

Good evening, my name is Jayce Kocurek and I am the Salutatorian for the class of 2023. I am honored to be standing here and am truly thankful for everyone who has helped guide and support me to get to this point. Graduation is a time for reflection on where we came from and what we have accomplished. It is also a time to look forward to what is to come and what we hope to achieve in our futures. Each of us has a story of how our time in school has shaped us and molded us into the people we are and the adults we are becoming. I came to this school in August of 2021 to begin my Junior year. I was scared at first because not only was I coming to a new school, but I was adjusting to a new home with a new foster family. I was quickly put at ease when I was welcomed with open arms by my teachers, administration and soon to be friends I now consider family. These friends would teach me that family isn't just blood and to not take life so seriously.

Coming from a big school was definitely different, but I don't regret the change one bit. All the memories that I have made and bonds that have been created I will cherish for the rest of my life. Going to a small school has been the best experience, because everyone knows everyone and you can enjoy the social aspect a little more. I learned so many things that will help me in my future, along with everyone here. We learned the importance of making lasting relationships and friendships. This skill is often lost in the fast pace of today's world, but it is something I will forever carry with me in everything I do, both professionally and personally.

Now with all that being said, I am going to give you a little background about my life. I have learned and believe that you have a choice in everything you do, that you can make your own path and that you can do anything you put your mind to. As a young kid I always wanted to become a United States Marine, mainly because I thought that was the only thing that I would be able to do and that I would be smart enough to do. So throughout my life that is what my mind was set on.

As a young child, we moved around a lot and by age 10, my world would become full of challenges, followed by what seemed like endless ups and downs. My family had made some bad choices, fueled by drug use, that made things extremely difficult for me. I was often scared, not knowing if we would have food or a place to sleep, at times we were even homeless. My brothers and I were forced to grow up early when in reality, I should have been enjoying being a kid, going to school, playing sports, enjoying video games, and playing outside with friends. Finally when I was 13, DCFS got involved and we were shuffled through multiple family members which only brought more challenges and loss. After multiple placements, I eventually met these wonderful people who would become my parents, Jessica and Kyle.

I was scared to live with them at first because they were complete strangers. Day by day it became more comfortable and we began to connect on so many things. They helped me find love for school again which I had lost through the past years, they encouraged me to play sports, and they showed me what a real family should be like. I then was adopted, so we made the decision for me to finish my last 2 years of high school in Edinburg and it was the best decision ever. I was finally starting to feel like a kid and have enjoyed every minute. I am very blessed to have

moved in with Kyle and Jessica and to have joined their family. Together, we welcomed a new addition this year, baby Koe, who made me a big brother. I hope I can be the best role model for him, and I will always strive to be someone he can look up to. All of these positive changes, although scary at times, opened up so many new opportunities for me including looking into other options for my future outside of the Marine Corps. My parents told me that I could do anything I put my mind to and college was now an option for me that was looking more and more like a reality. Personally, I think my mom just didn't want me out fighting a war but here we are...

Sports became an outlet for me that helped me with my emotions, anger, depression and much more. I developed so much, both skill wise and as a leader. Football was my favorite sport and the one I excelled at. I am so thankful for my coaches who pushed me to be my best and helped me grow both on and off the field. I will never forget Coach Jack Hanlon, may he rest in peace, who was the first to put me in for a kick return. He believed in me when I had never played a single down and it led to more opportunities for me on the field. Although at times he was tough, he helped me develop and would help guide me when I messed up. By my senior year, I couldn't accept that it would all be done because 2 years was just not enough. Both Jack and my uncle Zack Hanlon helped encourage me to pursue football beyond high school, and I am so excited to continue the grind at Illinois College in the fall as a Blueboy while I pursue a business degree.

In closing, I want to leave you with this. Life is about choices, we are faced with them every single day. Life will bring challenges, we have all experienced our fair share. Everyone has a past but everyone also has a future, it's what you choose to do with it that matters. Don't ever let where you came from, who your family is, or what you did in the past decide your future for you, or dictate what you deserve. Never did I think 5 years ago that I would have a wonderful family and be going to college with the opportunity to play football. My younger self would say I am lying. Don't give up when life gives you some rough patches, just remember there is always light at the tunnel. Always try to find the opportunities in the darkness, and I promise you, you will become successful in whatever you choose to do. Thank you.