



**June 14th Graduation Speech by**  
**the Voice of 2023, Ashley Herrera Mantanico**

Hello, faculty, friends, families, and my fellow 2023 graduates. My name is Ashley Herrera Mantanico. It is an honor to be speaking in front of all of you today and to welcome you to this very special occasion.

When I was anonymously selected to deliver the speech at graduation, I felt excited as much as I was nervous... partly because I would be speaking in front of a large audience for the first time, but also because I was getting caught up in knowing the perfect thing to say.

As most of you know, for my senior year I was taking courses at CCRI so I was hardly ever in the Paul Cuffee School building. I was worried that because I wasn't present for senior year, I wouldn't be able to properly represent this class. So as the deadline was approaching to submit the graduation speech I was constantly drafting, editing, deleting everything, drafting again, deleting again, revising again, over and over. But somewhere within this process, I realized that this feeling was similar to the one we have been experiencing for the past 1,461 days. We've been in this constant cycle of saving, scrapping, and revising our college and career choices while trying to graduate on time. So with that being said:

Dear Class of 2023,

We made it! In spite of a deadly worldwide pandemic, the challenges of virtual learning, and the immense stress of applying to colleges, we overcame it all. I want to start by emphasizing how important it is that we give praise to everyone in this room for not only making it through but doing so while accomplishing all of our goals. So let's give a round of applause for our Class of 2023.

My purpose for today is to invite you to savor this present moment, reflect on all we've accomplished, and most importantly, not think about the future at this moment. Since freshman year, and for some, since kindergarten, we have watched each other grow from being children to the young adults we are now. Within this time frame, we've cultivated meaningful relationships, supported one another through unprecedented times, and had the privilege to share a variety of insightful conversations with each other that have enabled us to become better, more informed individuals.

There will be a tremendous sense of loss as we say goodbye to our childhood friends, families, and educators who have witnessed and been part of our journey over the years. As I look into the crowd, I see that these are the people who have made us happy, given us advice during hard moments, and have always tried to make sure we succeed. They have been our pillars of support and sources of unwavering love throughout our academic lives.

Now, I'd like to get real with you all. As an 18 year old, one of my least favorite things about this age is being asked the most common question: "What do you plan to do in the future?" As a student, my

academic response is: "I'll go to college and major in blank blank" but what I really want to say is: "I'm 18, the age we start life not knowing what to expect but already having all these expectations put onto us... so I don't know and please stop asking me!"

This is so common, and no one likes this question because in all honesty, the majority of us do not know whether the decisions we are making are entirely right for us. How do we know if going to college, taking a gap year, or starting a new job is a good idea? How do we know we are not wasting our time? How do we know what is right and what is wrong? The uncomfortable part of life is that we don't. That is why it can feel lonely, stressful, and like we aren't good enough when trying to answer this question.

As we embark on our future plans, especially being completely on our own for the first time, remember that the world beyond these walls will be confusing, unknown, and challenging. I know that this is scary and not what you want to hear at a graduation ceremony but sometimes what we want isn't always what we need. Though social media might make us feel like everyone has it all figured out, the truth is that no one truly knows what they're doing and everyone is figuring it out as they go along. As the saying goes, the only way out is through. We must remind ourselves that our worth, our hard work, and capability are much greater than what external sources may lead us to believe.

As Jermaine Cole, one of the world's greatest musicians, once said, "There is no such thing as a life that is better than yours."

It is easy for us to get caught up in the desire to be better than others or to move faster, but one thing I have learned is that in the end, we all reach the destination we are meant to get to, no matter how or at which speed we choose to arrive. A reminder to all of you and myself is that everyone progresses through life at his or her own pace so avoid comparing yourself to others, refrain from judging someone's life choices, and most importantly, never let anyone, even yourself, question your worth in this world.

To our teachers in this room: thank you for inspiring us to be mindful, creative, and confident in using our voices to foster respectful communities. From our All School Meetings that kept us informed and united, to the pictures on Mr. Quirk's wall reminding us that school can be beautiful and memorable, to the art from Mrs. Lee's class honoring our work as we entered the building, to Ms. Osborne's "Life after the Bell" emails encouraging us to support and celebrate our accomplishments, each teacher has created a space filled with love, safety, and engagement. While I cannot name everyone who has been a significant part of mine and our lives, I'd still like to say "thank you", as I am immensely grateful to have been your student, as I'm sure we all are.

We have all worked diligently to reach this point, devoting our nights to homework, attending after-school tutoring, participating in various clubs, and, for some of us, holding jobs to support our families. We persevered and now serve as role models for future seniors who will soon stand on this stage. With that being said, I'd like to share a quote from Mexican-American singer Becky G that states, "Where we come from will always be in our hearts, but where we go is up to us." Many of our families made great sacrifices, even risking their lives to cross borders, ensuring that we could pursue our dreams unhindered by those same borders. In recognition of their bravery, we proudly represent and embrace our origins, especially since they have provided us the chance to build a more prosperous life. It is thanks to their support that we are receiving our diplomas and have the opportunity to explore various career options. To all the families here, please know that everything we have accomplished and everything we will achieve is largely to honor and value your hard work and sacrifices...so on behalf of all the graduates, thank you! And thank you for giving us a better life.

A todas las familias presentes en este día tan especial, quiero que sepan que todo lo que hemos logrado y todo lo que lograremos es en gran parte para honrar y valorar sus esfuerzos y sacrificios. Por parte de todos los graduados, Gracias, gracias por habernos dado una vida mejor.....

While beginning college, an academy, or a new job, it is our responsibility to achieve our aspirations, so that we may be in positions of influence to dismantle discriminatory barriers and bring equitable opportunities back into our families and into our communities. Our privilege gives us the chance to create a more sustainable and inclusive narrative, so let me ask you, how will you use your privilege during these times?

Being a first generation Latina I promised my family that I would leave where we came from in search of a better life. I would also like to promise them that I will always take where we are from, wherever I go, and I hope you—my fellow peers—will do the same. A mi familia, yo les prometí a ustedes que me iría de dónde venimos en busca de una vida mejor. También quiero prometer que siempre llevaré de dónde somos, dondequiera que vaya, y espero que ustedes -mis compañeros- hagan lo mismo.

Moving on from Paul Cuffee and into adulthood, never forget that our value extends far beyond our degrees and accomplishments; it is in our resilience, it is in our kindness, and it is in our desire to keep learning and growing. I'd like to conclude by sharing that I am eternally grateful for your presence here, and I wish you all a bright and successful future. Congratulations, Class of 2023!!!!!!