

Introduction of Valedictorian: Katharina Wyns Mr. Tim Smith

In a moment, our valedictorian, Katharina Wyns, will give the farewell address on behalf of the senior class. Kat came to us from Liberty Common School, which she attended since the 3rd grade. In 5th and 6th grade, her family traveled to Singapore, South East Asia, and Australia. Kat clearly benefited from this travel – she has a worldliness about her, an understanding that life is bigger than our small school.

Kat started at Ridgeview Classical as a sophomore and immediately enrolled in Latin class. After her first year, Kat elected to skip Latin II and worked independently to teach herself the most complicated grammar of the language so she could advance to Latin III. This past year, she read the poetry of Catullus and Horace with me and was always an important voice in the class. Kat is never unprepared, she can read poetry as well as students who have studied the language for twice as many years, and perhaps what is most impressive, Kat never failed to thank me at the end of each class. You students here today: take a page out of Kat's book: teachers like to be thanked. It makes a lasting impression.

Kat's other teachers also have great things to say about her. In science classes, she always wanted to understand concepts at a level beyond that covered in the textbook and requested readings from other sources that would provide these details. She was one of the best AP Physics students – which is quite remarkable because AP Physics was the first physics class she had ever taken. In mathematics, Kat took every course we offer. Mr. Luce regards her as his favorite student in his 15 years of teaching because she was simply a joy to have in the classroom and he will sorely miss her rapier sense of wit.

I should also say a few words about Kat's extracurriculars, on and off campus. Last year, Kat ran for Student Council president. She was defeated, and by worthy gentlemen, but her response reveals much about her graceful character. Rather than feeling dejected or bitter, Kat found a way to continue to serve her school as Student Council Parliamentarian and as head of several committees. She also devotes a tremendous amount of time to volunteer projects. She has started the "Silver Connections" club to bring students with her to a local nursing home, she visits the elderly at the Fort Collins Senior Center, and she volunteers at the hospital. She was a key member of the science bowl team. How Kat finds time for all these volunteer activities and to play piano and soccer and earn top grades in challenging courses boggles the mind, but for these reasons, the faculty of Ridgeview awarded her the prestigious honor of Student of the Quarter. She's also won the Daughters of the American Revolution Good Citizen award, the Kiwanis Youth Achiever Award, the Presidential Scholars award, two gold medals on the National Latin Exam and two Spanish awards, the Outstanding Junior award, the Character award, and first place at the Fall Festival Piano competition.

Last June, Kat joined me on a two-week tour of Italy. After participating in every fund-raising event the school offered and spearheading a few programs of her own, Kat became a star pupil in the course. She wrote sensitive and insightful essays about the Sistine Chapel and the monuments built by the emperor Hadrian. She easily earned an A in the class for her work, but I was most impressed by her vivacious curiosity during the on-site lectures and her enthusiasm for everything she saw. For me as a teacher, there is no prouder moment than watching a student find intellectual meaning and emotional satisfaction in beautiful things. While in Italy with Kat, I was moved to tears more than once, watching her name all the buildings in the Roman Forum, identify the figures in Raphael's School of Athens, and stand in shocked silence before the remains of victims of Pompeii. Spending so much time with Kat, I came to know her not only as an outstanding student (and she certainly ranks among the best I've ever taught), but also as a deeply sensitive and observant human, one who appreciates creativity, beauty, the good and the true.

In her senior thesis, Kat spoke about her understanding of the truth and how we can come to know it. Following Nietzsche and using her knowledge of Latin to find the deepest meaning of the word “aspiration.” She wrote,

Aspiration is what one breathes for. It allows man to pursue truth, which is the highest end of man, his highest hope, his purpose. This searching provides those who are brave enough to act upon their aspirations. It is from this lofty place that man may look outside and further examine his character and being. The truth propels man toward freedom, not a freedom from what, but rather a freedom for what. It is a freedom which moves man beyond his confinement, so that he might transcend to become someone greater and nobler.

Kat knows that there is no happiness, no freedom, no beauty in a life of mediocrity or complacency. She calls us to strive for more, to aspire, to find the truth in the examined life; anything else is not good enough. We must be dynamic – for Ridgeview graduates, for anyone in our modern society, the enemy is stasis. It would be tempting to allow the senior thesis to be the end of the quest for truth, it is tempting to sit comfortably in our houses, to resign ourselves to an easy life, and maintain the status quo. But for Kat, the thesis, the high school experience is only the beginning of aspiring to a dynamic life.

In the quote I read, she also talks about freedom. Kat calls us to seek a freedom to be better, and what a great definition of freedom that is – to pursue a life that makes use of what we have learned, a life of striving to aspire beyond what might be easy and safe and comfortable. Kat calls us to live a life worth living.