

K.V.

Hi everyone, I am a graduate of Acton Boxborough High Schools 2018 class. Next year, I will be attending the University of Vermont to study ecological design and green building. In this past year, I had the opportunity, as part of my English senior project class, to provide fresh sustainable produce to the Mt. Calvary community supper. In order to do this I decided to build a hydroponic greenhouse... with a partner, *whom I did not know*. Aaaaand Judging by my intonation you can tell not everything went as smoothly as planned.

Through my process I had to overcome a LOT of challenges. I have never taken woodshop, networked, or relied on my communication with people I did not know for such a influential project. Especially not one that is so important to me. I had to learn, and be devoted to learning in this process. And, as a senior, devotion to work at the end of high school is hard to hold onto. For all of you that don't know there is a term called the Senior Slide: the tendency of seniors to not put there best effort in after being accepted to college. In my senior project class, this phenomenon was evident... the magnitude of projects were vastly trimmed down entering the 3rd quarter of the year. Except for me. I have been raised to be devoted to anything that I put my mind to. And St. Matthew's community fostered that trait since before I can remember. Everyone I see here today has busy lives but takes the time to be here, to participate in this community. The devotion, charitability, and community values that I've inherited from this Church have aided me through my process and helped me create a project that I am truly proud of. A special thanks to Wayne L. and Betsy C. and the whole Mission Outreach and Advocacy team for supporting me in my journey not only through funding but through the sense of community they gave me in my final year here.

From guiding my decision to donate to the community, helping me to stick with my project, and providing me with a sense of community from a young age. St. Matthew's has helped me not only with my greenhouse project but throughout my life. As I enter college, I reflect on the times I've had here and know they will continue to guide me in my life. In all aspects of life devotion is needed, whether it be here in the church, workplace, or among each other. So thank you, for instilling devotion in me.

J.W.

When I was younger, I did a theater camp where we had a warm-up dance called "Alive, Awake, Alert, Enthusiastic." Younger me made the mistake of going home to my parents and showing them this dance, which they abbreviated to "Triple-A E." I say I made a mistake, because my parents have not stopped reminding me to be "Triple-A E" since I showed them the song. While I used to roll my eyes at them, the advice buried in the song has stuck with me to this day, and given me the maturity and wherewithal to participate cooperatively in activities I didn't want to do. And what a surprise: being alive, awake, alert, and enthusiastic has helped me enjoy many things I may not have enjoyed otherwise.

I wrote 900 words of advice for my school newspaper, but unfortunately only 600 of them made the cut. This is the other 300 words of advice that express what I've learned in my 6 years at St. Matthew's.

Be kind to everyone, especially the weird kid no one talks to. Having spent a fair amount of time as the self-identified "weird kid," I cannot overemphasize how important it is to

include them. Like we expressed in our parable, you may not always be comfortable with another person's self-expression, but allowing them to exist despite your discomfort is what being open-minded really means.

On the subject of so-called "weird kids," I offer a quote from the beginning of the Great Gatsby: **"Whenever you feel like criticizing any one, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had." Give others the benefit of the doubt. Never assume you know the whole story.** A lot of the time, all it takes to connect with people you never expected that you would is to figure out the part of the story you're missing. As Christians, engaging in meaningful dialogue with people is something we like to think we're familiar with. Remembering to actively practice that, maybe even especially outside of church, is one of the simplest and most effective ways to share God's love.

You can't be happy all the time. Trying to be will either make you depressed, impulsive, or both. You can, however, be mostly content most of the time. This demands long-term thinking. It's cliché and often obnoxious when people constantly preach about trying journaling, or yoga, or meditation, or - you knew it was coming - prayer, and I'll admit that I'm guilty of it. But the reason people are so insistent is because it's so rare that anything reflective will turn out to be completely useless, if you give it the attention and thought it deserves. Keeping a diary for almost two years has done wonders for my emotional maturity and self-reflection. Obviously, not everything works for everyone, but giving various strategies a chance can help you learn a lot about yourself that may lead you to form healthy habits that help you be mostly content most of the time.

The most important advice I can give to anyone is: **Be honest with yourself and with others.** Nothing has made a more positive impact on my life than self-honesty. Self-honesty means having the courage to admit to yourself that no, in fact, you are not going to start writing that email right now, so it's probably better to work on something less daunting - but still productive - than it is to be scrolling through Facebook waiting for inspiration that, deep down, you know will never come. On a deeper level, self-honesty can help you identify your strengths and weaknesses so you can find a niche that suits you, in friendships, relationships, and your broader church community. If it weren't for self-honesty, I wouldn't trust myself to give other people advice like this.

The final sentiment I wish to convey is **Learn from experience. Most advice doesn't resonate until it's too late.** I add this mostly for a touch of self-awareness. I'd heard most of this advice at some point before I needed it, and had I paid it any attention the first time around, I might have avoided a great number of mistakes. But I present it to you now in the hopes that it will resonate after you've made that first mistake; that once you've been through whatever ordeal life throws at you next, you'll recognize the importance of what your mentors have been trying to tell you all along.

While I know I've said that learning from experience, and being honest with yourself, and thinking long term, and being kind to people are all the most important advice to take with you, it all really comes back to the one piece of advice my parents gave me as a child: be alive, be awake, be alert, and be enthusiastic. Being a loving Christian means sharing God's open-minded love with everyone we meet, and the best way to impart that love to others so that it's received with gratefulness is to remember those four words.