

SAY YES!

It is my absolute pleasure to be here today at Eden SDA High School and I am so humbled by this privilege to address these fine graduates. I attended Eden High School graduation for the first time last year and I was so impressed by the entire ceremony. I sat in the second row just there and was blown away by the amazing singing and the superb speeches. I recall especially last year's keynote speaker, Mr. Berrisford Awardo. He told great stories and funny jokes. He was charismatic and engaging. What a fantastic speaker! I could have listened to him for hours. I remember thinking that they would have a hard time topping him. Then about a half hour after the ceremony ended Ms. Sherilyn Flowers came up to me and asked me if I would be the keynote speaker at next year's graduation. You all know what my immediate answer was, right? Because here I am... But I said no. I said NO! Well Ms. Sherilyn didn't take no for an answer, and she then went and asked my husband and daughter if I would be the speaker, and they of course signed me right up. Because they understood that **her invitation wasn't about me, it was about every single person who believes in education, in this school, and in these students.** Today I address you as a representative of one of many organizations who provide scholarships and other support to the students of Eden High School. My group is called Belize Education Project, and I would like

to use the story of how we came to be here, involved in this community, to illustrate why saying yes to an opportunity, rather than no, is what we are called to do. Before I tell that story I would also like to acknowledge that there are many, many individuals and organizations from across Belize, the United States, Canada and beyond who, in solidarity with Eden High School, work to educate these fine young women and men in hopes that they can rise higher and reach farther. Here today are representatives from Hearts of Christ, the Belize Ministry of Education, as well as staff and teachers from Eden High School itself, and without them, perhaps some of our graduates wouldn't be crossing this stage today.

As you learned in the introduction I am not a teacher, I am not a principal; I am not really an educator in the classic sense. I am actually a medical doctor. I first came to Belize 10 years ago as part of a medical mission group, where we did surgeries to repair hernias and remove gall bladders. Shortly before coming to Belize I had a patient back in Colorado named Judy Denison. I had prescribed some medications for Ms. Judy, which she ended up not using. She asked what she should do with them and I expressed chagrin that I couldn't take them with me to Belize on a medical mission trip I was preparing for. She asked a few questions about the trip and went on her way. Two days later I received a call from the coordinator of the trip telling me that Judy Denison had signed up to join the group.

Now Ms. Judy doesn't have a medical background but she has a great sense of adventure and a fantastic understanding of her usefulness and her gifts. At the time Ms. Judy was turning 70 years old and her daughter, Jean Kirshner, was having a birthday gathering for her. Ms. Jean invited me as she felt like her family ought to get to know better the person her mother would be traveling with. I met Ms. Jean on the doorstep of her house as I arrived for the dinner. I knocked on the door and Ms. Jean answered. I said, "I am Rebecca Knight" and Jean said, "So you're the person my mom is going to Belize with". I nodded, "Yes" and we stood there for just a moment in awkward silence. I said, "So, do you want to go to Belize, too?" And Ms. Jean said, "Yes. Yes I would." Keep in mind that we were planning to come to Belize to perform surgery. Ms. Jean is a primary school teacher – many of you may have met her - and, like Ms. Judy, has no medical background. But like mother, like daughter, she understood her usefulness and her gifts and jumped on board the mission. About 10 minutes later Ms. Jean had convinced her best friend, who happens to be a nurse, to go on the trip as well. **They all said yes.** They all understood the higher calling. There was no hesitation. **No was not an option.**

None of us had any idea what to expect on that first trip. None of us had been to Belize. I spent the week fixing hernias along with nurse Chris' help. Ms. Judy went to villages to take blood pressure and

hand out pills, and Ms. Jean reached out to Ms. Tharine Gabourel, the beloved principal of Eden Primary School, to see how she could be of service. The most important thing we all learned that week was that this is a community filled with eager learners, with children who yearn for opportunity to expand their minds, to rise higher and reach farther. We returned home to the United States with the understanding that **this community has budding young doctors, and teachers, architects and bankers, many of whom just need a little support so they can reach that goal and make that dream come true.** We instantly refocused our efforts from surgery to literacy and the Belize Education Project was born. With Ms. Jean as our leader we all worked very hard to build genuine relationships with Ms. Tharine Gabourel and her teachers, to stand in solidarity with them in order to better the education their students were getting. We came to know not just those teachers at Eden Primary School, but teachers and principals from Bullet Tree SDA School, Hills of Promise, and Buena Vista Government School. Year after year we came to Belize, every October, and worked with the teachers and got to know many of the students who we would read with, sing with, and play football with – we always lost. It was heartbreaking to hear that some of the brightest students at those schools would not have the opportunity to further their education due to lack of funds. Their educational careers would be over at

standard 6. That first year, we met a bright girl whose education ended at age 12. She asked for assistance so she could attend high school. **And we said yes.** We scraped together the money and got her into high school within three days. Specifically, it was Ms. Judy's effort that got this girl into high school. And by the way, I invited Ms. Judy to come back to Belize for this graduation ceremony, and she is sitting right over there. At 80 years old Ms. Judy is still saying YES! The following year, through Ms. Judy's hard work, we were able to support another student, and over the years we have grown and now we have 30 students here at Eden High School who are supported by Belize Education Project. Many of those who sponsor students through our program have never been to Belize and will never meet face-to-face the student they support. How does this happen? Why would someone who lives a world away make a sacrifice for someone they may never meet, for someone who may never repay them, with someone whom they have nothing in common except their humanity? **Our humanity is exactly why we do this.** The aim of this year's class is to be a blessing to humanity. What does that mean, to be a blessing to humanity? Humanity's greatest achievements are not in its discoveries, but in how those discoveries are applied to reduce inequity, to raise those who are struggling, to provide opportunities where hope is limited. All of us here have at one time or another seen human tragedies that broke

our hearts, and yet we did nothing. Not because we didn't care, but because we didn't know what to do. If we had known how to help we would have acted. As you sit here moments away from becoming a high school graduate I hope you understand what this means. This ceremony isn't your transition from being a schoolgirl or schoolboy to a young woman or young man. It isn't purely a celebration of your academic accomplishments. **This graduation ceremony is your community's acknowledgement that by virtue of your education you have power, and you have a voice.** From those to whom much is given, much is expected. When you consider what those of you here in this yard have been given in talent and opportunity, **there is almost no limit to what the world has a right to expect from you.** I hope in 10 or 20 years you will come back here to Eden High School and reflect on what you have done with your talent and your energy. I hope you will judge yourselves not on your professional accomplishments, but also on what you have done to **address inequity, to right wrongs, to stand up for those who feel they do not have power or a voice.** So where do you begin? Where do you go from here? I hope you learn from my error, when I said no to a tremendous opportunity. I challenge you to say yes. SAY YES! Let's break that down: Y-E-S. Y stands for YOU! You are the one who will make it happen. Do not be afraid that you are inadequate; on the contrary, know that you

are powerful beyond measure. The inspirational author and speaker Marianne Williamson writes, “We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.” Mohandas Gandhi, the great liberator of India, reminds us “you must be the change you wish to see in the world.” It is up to **YOU!**

The E in YES stands for extend kindness to others. Kindness is like a stone in a pond. When you throw in a stone, the ripples go farther and farther and sometimes you don’t know what shore they reach on the other side. If you’re kind to somebody, you have no idea how it may change him or her. Reach out to a stranger. Maybe that person is older than you, or younger, maybe she or he has a different skin color than you, maybe they speak a different language, but just make her or his day a little happier and you’ll be amazed at the change in you. But to see that change you have to extend yourself first.

The S in YES stands for shine your light. Use the gifts you have been given to be a beneficial presence on this planet. For example, Kishana Valerio, one of our BEP scholars, has an incredible singing voice. My heart is absolutely filled with joy when I hear her sing. She has been given this tremendous talent and she shares it so wonderfully. That is not showing off, that is Kishana using her

amazing voice to bring beauty and happiness to the world. You each have a special skill or talent; you have been imparted with knowledge through the course of your high school education. Use that skill or talent or knowledge to illuminate others, to raise those who are on their knees. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the light of the world, like a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp then hides it under a basket. Instead the lamp is placed on a stand where it gives light for all."

So that is my message to you today, dear graduates. Say YES to opportunities, to making a difference in your world, to extending kindness, to shining your light. On behalf of the Belize Education Project I congratulate you on your academic achievements. To commemorate your accomplishment BEP will present each graduate with a bookmark, which we hope will remind you of this most wonderful of days that you worked so long and hard to reach. So finally, Ms. Sherilyn, as to your question of will I deliver the commencement speech to Eden HS in 2018, my answer is YES!!!