

127TH COMMENCEMENT

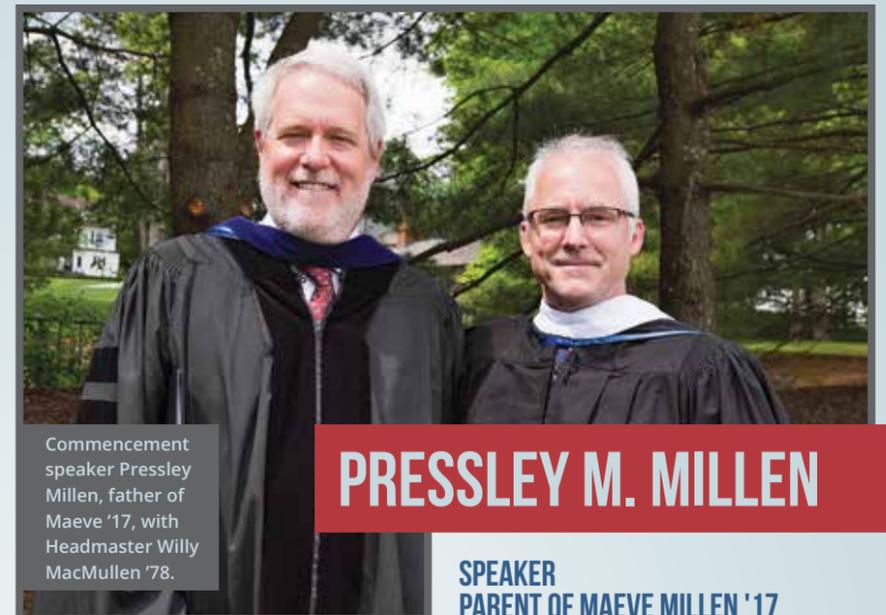
“The 21st century is going to provide you with no shortage of opportunities to **BE BRAVE**, to **STAND UP** to bullies, to **NEGOTIATE** with and **OCCASIONALLY DEFY** authority, and to **HELP** those in extreme circumstances.”

—PRESSLEY M. MILLEN

Photography by
ROBERT FALCETTI



Trevor Esilu '17, from Gabarone, Botswana, with his mother.



Commencement speaker Pressley Millen, father of Maeve '17, with Headmaster Willy MacMullen '78.

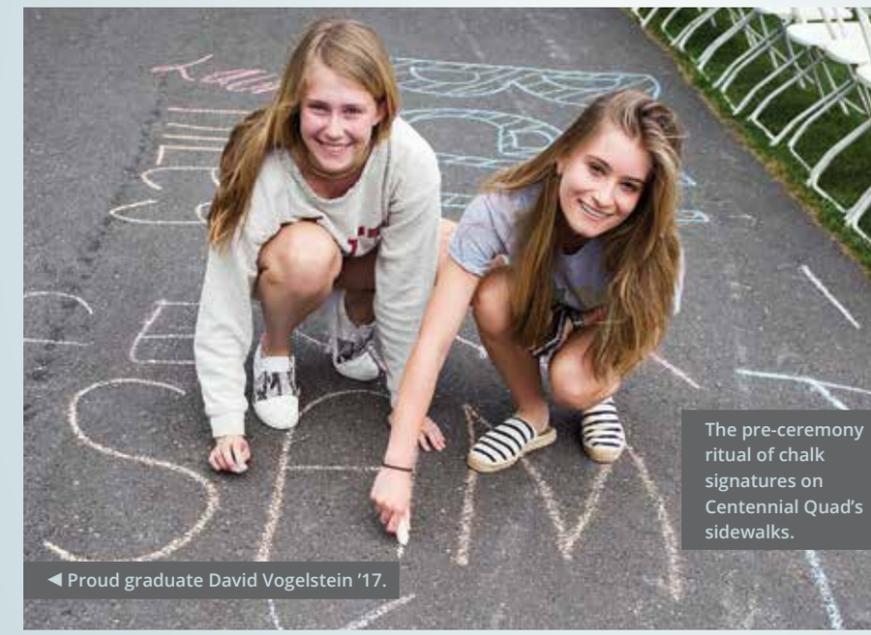
PRESSLEY M. MILLEN

SPEAKER PARENT OF MAEVE MILLEN '17

Mr. MacMullen, faculty and staff, family and friends, and above all, members of the graduating Class of 2017: greetings and congratulations! I am very happy to be part of this Commencement and want to thank you all for having me. Even though we live in North Carolina, 597 miles from the Taft campus, we have been—and been treated as—members of the Taft family for the past four years. Through our own daughter and other friends here, we've gotten to see how this school takes promising kids and turns them into young women and men who fulfill their promise....

I want to tell you a little bit about a boy who went to Taft over 90 years ago. Some of you may know his story, but I suspect that most of you don't. It's one worth hearing, and if you want to learn more about him you can read the *Taft Bulletin* from Summer 1998....

As a young man after Taft and college, Varian Fry '26 had had a fairly undistinguished career as a journalist, but, more importantly, he had a great moral compass. As a journalist, he traveled to Germany in the mid-1930s and he did not like what he saw. Then, in August 1940, about 14 years after he left Taft, he was offered a job with the Emergency Rescue Committee....



◀ Proud graduate David Vogelstein '17.

The pre-ceremony ritual of chalk signatures on Centennial Quad's sidewalks.





Tise Ben-Eka '17 receives the Class of 1981 Award, along with two other seniors, from Susan McCabe.



Faculty member Shannon Lenz Guidotti receives the William and Lee Abramowitz Award for Teaching Excellence from Dean of Faculty Edie Traina.



Jalissa Rodriguez '17 with her parents.



ELIZA DENIOUS '17

HEAD MONITOR

"People are what make Taft a special place.... High school is a time for learning how to be comfortable with yourself, for figuring out who you are, and we have spent the last two, three, four years growing up together. Like any team that needs to discover how to work as a unit, we stumbled at first, but now we have merged the two pieces, togetherness and independence, and have come to be a true family."

Head Monitors Eliza Denious '17 and Nick Cutler '17 carry the class stone to its new home in the wall of Centennial Dorm.



NICK CUTLER '17

HEAD MONITOR

"Graduations are a celebration of moving on to a new life milestone, but maybe more importantly, to celebrate the memories we have made together at Taft. Together, the key word, is one that we as a class use quite frequently. We do everything as a group. We eat meals together, do afternoon activities together, hang out together, and are curious and creative...together. Mr. Mac has said throughout the year that our community is a table, and for the community to function properly everyone must have a seat and a voice at the table."



Gabby Gonzalez Carpio '17 and her big fan on a special day.

He was dispatched to Marseille in the south of France. This was just three months after the Nazis had defeated France at the beginning of the Second World War. The Germans occupied Paris and the northern part of France while the southern part was ruled by a puppet government in the town of Vichy. This was well before the U.S. entered the war and this country was still technically neutral.

Marseille is a tough seaport city in the best of times, and in the summer of 1940 it was packed with refugees from all over Europe. And they were all desperately looking for a way out. The refugees were all seeking to go west—going east meant imprisonment and quite possibly death. And Fry...showed up in Marseille with nothing but a typewriter and a suitcase with \$3,000 cash, and the job of trying to get out as many refugees as he could.

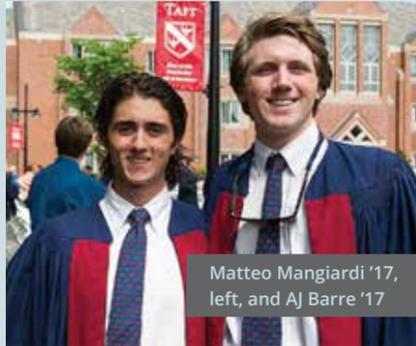
In those dark days, the most valued document was something called an "exit and transit visa" that would get a refugee out of France and through Spain, on to Portugal, which was a neutral country. From there, a traveler could get to Cuba or South America, or occasionally, the United States. If you're at all familiar with the plot of the movie *Casablanca*, these visas were the documents for which refugees would beg, steal, and even kill, as in that film.

Fry was operating in a foreign country and right under the nose of the Nazi secret police, the Gestapo. Under the law in Vichy, France, refugees were required to surrender on demand to the Gestapo for deportation to the east.

Upon arrival in Marseille, Fry got right to work. He found people who could forge travel documents or bribe Vichy officials to look the other way. He chartered leaky boats that could slip out of the harbor on dark nights. He located places to hide refugees while they waited for their papers to come through. In his work, he was aided by a U.S. State Department official



Sophie Kamhi '17 steps forward to receive her award as Valedictorian.



Matteo Mangiardi '17, left, and AJ Barre '17



LAUREN FADIMAN '17

CLASS SPEAKER

"As you leave...stand in wonder at this place and all the world. For this brief moment you occupy a profound liminal space: you own both this campus and the future; you will not long be in this position, as soon you will inevitably be consigned to the history of this place, thrust ever forwards. Perch on a stone and gaze at the world around you. How big the pond is when you stand at its edge, how widely the fields seem to run when you sit in their caress. Take a final deep breath, and release it slowly. Your words will linger in the atmosphere of this place."

Class speaker Lauren Fadiman '17, who received the revered Aurelian Award for "sterling character, high scholarship, and forceful leadership," along with five other awards.



The Baird family with several Taft generations: from left, Nolan '86, Nick '20, graduate Karalyn '17, Noah '16, and Lanny '54.



Cauviya Selva '17 and her family celebrate her achievement.



Family members cheer on their graduates.

PRESSLEY M. MILLEN cont.

named Hiram Bingham, whose father was a U.S. senator from Connecticut. And Hiram was more than happy—against direct orders from Washington, by the way—to issue as many visas as he could, even ones with fake names.

It's reasonable to think that the things Fry learned here were the same qualities that made him successful in Marseille. What kind of person can just show up in a place where he knows absolutely no one and immediately get the lay of the land and begin to act effectively? Maybe someone who's done that same thing when she's come to a school like this.

"FRY HAD LEARNED HOW TO WORK WITH OTHERS—NOT JUST AS AN INDIVIDUAL—TOWARD A GREATER SHARED GOAL, WHICH IS SOMETHING ELSE YOU ALL HAVE LEARNED HERE."

Fry had learned how to work with others—not just as an individual—toward a greater shared goal, which is something else you all have learned here.

Fry, when you think about it, was someone who had learned to engage with *the world*, not just a campus in Connecticut, or New York, or even Paris. He was willing to go to...one of the toughest places on earth, because that's where he could best be of use.

Maybe, like a lot of you, Fry also learned to inculcate that particular prep school relationship with authority that can best be described as "negotiable." He knew when it was time to obey authority, but also knew when and how to circumnavigate it. He also



Bagpipers lead seniors and Taft's faculty members into Centennial Quad filled with family and friends.



Senior Dean Pope's sunglasses reflect Taft's buildings.

PRESSLEY M. MILLEN cont.

had a knack for knowing when to safely ignore authority. And—not lightly—he knew when to defy authority....

His bravery was impressive, but, as Mr. Mac puts it, there's always the important question of whether you are effective. And was Fry ever effective! In 13 months in Marseille, with the Gestapo and Vichy authorities breathing down his neck and with Fry breaking the law every day, he was credited with saving over 2,200 refugees from what would almost always have been certain death.

Among those were the artist Marc Chagall, who later designed the famous Peace Window at the United Nations in New York. He also helped save Hannah Arendt, who became the world's foremost philosopher on the subject of totalitarianism. And Claude Levi-Strauss, acknowledged as one of the 20th century's greatest anthropologists. All of these were people whose nationalities or politics or heritages had them on the run....

In 1994, 28 years after his death, Fry became the first American citizen to be honored among the Righteous of Nations at Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial. This honor is given only to those who voluntarily risked their own lives to help the victims of the Holocaust. Only four other Americans have been so honored.

Varian Fry's heritage is now your heritage as Taft graduates. The 21st century—as we've all learned—is going to provide you with no shortage of opportunities to be brave, to stand up to bullies, to negotiate with and occasionally defy authority, and to help those in extreme circumstances. In short, opportunities to put into practice the things you've learned here. ■

Pressley Millen P'17 is a senior fellow at the Duke School of Law and has led a distinguished life as a lawyer, educator, and public servant.

MICHAEL WASSERSTEIN '17

CLASS SPEAKER

"About a month ago, I was hiking with my dad, and he asked me the one thing that I learned the most at Taft. He was fascinated when I told him that I learned to interact and engage with people, rather than any academic concept. [As part of] a community, we have learned this incredibly important skill of interacting with others. And the unique togetherness that our class exemplifies will also help us engage with others in the future. With such a global population at Taft, I encourage you all to reach out and maintain these powerful connections that we have made."



Class speaker Michael Wasserstein '17, who won several prizes, enjoys the ceremony with classmates.



Sonny An '17 is awarded the honor of Salutatorian.



Raya Petrova '17 with her teacher Laura Monti '89.



Tise Ben-Eka '16 with her family and Taft teaching fellow Idara Foster '11, far left.