Current and former Taft parent A.J. Wasserstein was invited to give the school’s Commencement address. Here, we share excerpts from his talk about what he wished he had known when he was about to enter college.
When I was your age I thought I had it all figured out. After all, I was graduating from high school—clearly, I had mastered everything there was to possibly know about life. Turns out I was wrong about many things. What I thought was important was not. And what I thought was unimportant was actually quite important. The single most vital concept I wish I understood was that life is all about optimizing around long-term happiness. This might seem obvious, but so many young adults rush ahead into life without making happiness their primary goal. Sometimes the excitement and noise of our lives on a day-to-day basis pulls us away from long-term happiness. Aristotle defined the very purpose of life as developing fulfillment, satisfaction, and joy, moving from novice to proficiency. Happiness is being in harmony in your personal relationships, your college activities, your spirituality, and your health. Happiness is knowing and living your values—having a strong and intentional sense of who you are. Happiness feels like being in a state of flow. But happiness is hard, just like mastering a foreign language. It takes time, energy, and diligent work to get there—but it is certainly worth it and best of all, you can absolutely do this.

Your next step on your destination to happiness is college. College is an amazing opportunity and experience. It is a magical four-year period in your life that should be spent with age came experience, sometimes painful, but other times a privilege. As upperclassmen, it came that the most beautiful moments were those outside of our structured schedule, such as picnics on the fields as the sun set atop the flag of the athletic building, or perhaps going sledding. All those new awakenings, opening our eyes to more than just responsibility, but also the somber realization of injustice and inequality. To that end, this was the class that came together beautifully in the face of adversity, hosting an inspiring yet productive meeting one night in the winter, and so at last we recognized our place on this campus, holding on in solidarity. So here you all sit before me, the eldest students of Taft—an admirable group of unique individuals who worked together to guide this campus as best we could.

Assistant Headmaster Jeremy LaCasce presents Raymond Bai ‘18 with the Aurelian Award, awarded to a senior who is “outstanding in sterling character, high scholarship, and forceful leadership.” Bai was also a recipient of the Heminway Merriman Award.

Head Monitors Leigh Sharpless ’18 and Peter Horne ’18 display the 2018 class stone, which was later installed in Centennial Quadrangle.

Pearl Young ’18, winner of the Dance Award, the Berkeley F. Matthews ’96 Award, and a recipient of a Global Studies and Service Diploma.

Head Monitors Leigh Sharpless ’18 and Peter Horne ’18 share a touching moment with their mother. HIGHPOINT PICTURES

Kevin Wharfe ’18 shares a touching moment with his mother. HIGHPOINT PICTURES

Clyde Ramos ’18, winner of the Thomas Sabin Chase Award in Art.

D. Wanschial ’18 surrounded by Taft friends.

Dig Singh ’18 and his family. HIGHPOINT PICTURES

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HEADMONITORS

Leigh Sharpless ’18

Head Monitor

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Thank you, Taft faculty, for guiding us….Whether it was in the form of advising, teaching, coaching, or just chatting, the help you all have given us over these years has propelled our transition from timid freshmen and sophomore to confident young men and women. While we’ll miss your exemplary teaching inside the classroom, we will miss the impromptu and informal moments the most, where you have helped us grow as people. The late-night dorm discussions [and] the last-minute lunches… were just a few moments that helped shape the community into our family. We admire your contagious energy….We cannot imagine living in an upper school boys’ dorm with young children and constant fire alarms as requirements for the job, yet you always maintained your friendly attitudes. No one can thank you enough for what you do!
embraced, relished, and most of all, not wasted. Although it might seem like being admitted to college is an ending point—particularly after all the hard work you did during the daunting college admission process—it’s a new beginning.

Whether you are off to study physics, computer science, or finance, one of the main points of college is to learn how to learn—to become analytical, a critical thinker, and to answer what do you want to be, you must first understand who you are going to be—and college is a fantastic venue to discover and answer the “who are you going to be” question.”

“A.J. Wasserstein

Barbara Garza Herrera ’18
Class Speaker

There are certain qualities that are, because of their inabil-
ity to be assessed numerically or comparatively, taken as secondary to extracurricular endeavors, like the way we treat or engage with one another…. Like the multiple abilities you possess, the afection and sense of caring we develop for our peers is learned behavior that is strengthened over time. At Taft, I’ve come to acknowledge that I am the person I am now because of who you are, and the same applies to us all: students, parents, staff, and faculty alike.

As said by my first English teacher at Taft, “One must love love—be humbler actions, this way, become a prayer—a statement of faith in kindness before she can show it to anyone else. One must cherish kindness before she can be kind to anyone else. One must cherish love—be humble. Persistence, resilience, and stick-to-itiveness are all your allies and will help you prevail and find happiness. When I was your age, people would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up. When you get to college you might experience something for the first time—failure. Failure is going to be part of your life, so you might as well get used to it and embrace it. To think you’ll coast through college and life without consequences. Try the hard English class; push yourself to give a new club sport a whirl, join the school newspaper. While in college, lean in—take full advantage. When you are in college, resist the temptation to stay ensconced in your own bubble. In a conversation I had with Mr. Mac last year about transitioning into college, he asserted that different is not only an innocuous enough question, but one that might be exactly the wrong question to ask a young person. The right question to do this. Interacting with people who are not like you is incredibly impor-
tant in life to broaden and expand yourself. When you get to college you might experience something for the first time—failure. Failure is going to be part of your life, so you might as well get used to it and embrace it. To think you’ll coast through college and life without experiencing failure is optimistic and naive. All people pursuing happiness place to do this. Interacting with people who are not like you is incredibly impor-
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Earlier this year I visited the Library of Congress to [do] research while I was at home in Virginia. I noticed a stone plaque with gold lettering that puzzled me: "We taste the spices of Arabia, yet never feel the scorching sun that brings them forth." I began searching for some extraneous idea that could be reflected in these words. Throughout our careers here we have been offered the spices of Arabia in many different ways. The attention we receive at Taft has cultivated, enhanced, and "spiced" our individual talents and interests. We have opened art galleries to showcase our paintings and photographs. We have hosted open dialogues to lead conversations on social issues. We have worked for a spot on varsity baseball team, and been given a lead role in the fall musical. We have learned to no longer consider ourselves just math students or English students, but all-around students. Tasting these various spices at Taft has enhanced our very being. Our future service to the school should reciprocate all that it has offered to us.

To all of the graduates, I wish you good luck and success in your next chapter. I wish you fun and enjoyment. But more than anything else, I wish you happiness.

A.J. Wasserstein has led a distinguished career as an entrepreneur, received numerous awards for his leadership, served on multiple not-for-profit boards, taught at the Yale School of Management, and authored a book on raising children.

For more Commencement photos visit: www.taftphotos.com/Commencement-2018.

Selected photos, where noted, courtesy of Highpoint Pictures.