

6/9/95

Alice Deal Junior High

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

June 9, 1995

REMARKS BY
FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON AT
THE ALICE DEAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL PROMOTIONAL EXERCISES
WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this important occasion. I want to thank Principal Moss and the administrators, faculty, and board members for enabling me to come and see first hand how exciting and accomplished Deal is and to join in congratulating all those who are being promoted.

I'm also pleased that there are so many parents and relatives and friends of the 9th graders here today, because I know that you have not only worked hard in supporting your own boy or girl promoted today, but also this school. And I know how much joy and pride you feel because this day has come. But I am particularly pleased to look out and see the class of 1995. I am grateful for your invitation to be a part of this ceremony.

There are a number of you whom I know. I know others of your parents. And I have a young woman working for me as a press assistant, Karen Finney, who graduated from Deal in 1982. And when she found out that I was going to be participating in this Deal ceremony -- in fact she's with me here today -- Karen, I'm going to embarrass you, and ask you to stand up.

Karen told me that her life and studies at Deal made a very big impression on her. She talked about some of the classes she took, particularly she remembered one that combined history and literature in the study of different cultures, from ancient Rome and Greece to Elizabethan England, and beyond. She still remembered that class and said that, "It opened my mind to the world, it's possibilities, and the people who live in it." The second thing she told me was -- and I'm sure many of you who we have just heard will appreciate this -- I was NEVER, NEVER late for chorus practice." She said that, "Mrs. Nicholson taught me to sing, and I mean really sing, and when I joined the chorus, I could just carry a tune. She made me believe I was as good as Whitney Houston."

But I especially appreciated, as Karen looked back over what seems like many years since she was here, but she could summon them up so easily and quickly, because she said, "My time at Alice Deal set me on a path to strive for excellence. My teachers engaged me as an active participant in my education,

pushed me to think, and to have confidence in my ideas and my opinions." Well I can tell you, having had the privilege of having Karen work for me now for more than 2 years, that the grounding she received here is exhibited every single day. So I want personally to thank this school on behalf of her and on behalf of myself for the preparation she received.

Many people have asked me why I would come to address a 9th Grade promotion. Well last year I addressed a high school commencement here in Washington, DC and I thought it was only fitting that I have a chance to come and say a few words and congratulate those of you who are moving on to high school.

But it's also because Deal has an extraordinary reputation. You've already proven that. We've heard your extraordinary chorus. We know that you represent the full diversity and potential of America. This is a school that takes the education of all students seriously. And I wanted to come and thank you for that.

At a time when there are many among us who would turn back the clock, retreat from our commitment to making the most out of every one of our citizens, try to argue that we no longer need to support the diversity that makes America so special and unique in the history of the world, sound the retreat on our support for public education. I wanted to do what I could to highlight some simple but essential truths about our country and about our young people that anyone can see and feel in this auditorium today.

I am personally tired of people only talking about and accenting the negative among us. I am tired of people only pointing out all that is done wrong by a very few of our young people. We have in America, the finest young people in the world. And that is true no matter where you live no matter who your parents are -- because I know -- I see you day in and day out. And I want all of us to get beyond the negative stereotypes that portray our children in ways that is not at all in line with the reality.

Yes it makes news, to focus on those kids who make mistakes and commit crimes. We all know that makes the headlines, but that does not represent the vast majority of young people in America or in Washington, D.C. And I want all of us (Applause) to know what we have to celebrate here at Deal.

I was personally thrilled at the accomplishments of your MathCounts team and I want to congratulate all of you on that. I know, and I just read the article in the "Real Deal," about your chorus' accomplishments. But I also know that there are members of this class who have excelled in every area of accomplishment here at Deal. And that you have also not only been satisfied with working hard on your own behalf, but in giving service to

others. Being part of the service programs in this community can and has made a difference. I understand that your soccer team will be going to Trinidad next week, I know you've worked hard to make that dream come true. And I could go on and on because I was given a long list of the individual and collective accomplishments of this school and particularly of this class. So I hope that not only your friends and family who are here, but the larger community will just stop a minute and think through what we are able to do together when we work on behalf of our young people.

Now I was talking with Principal Moss just a few minutes ago, and I think it is harder being a teenager today than it was when I was young. Every generation thinks that it faces new problems and to some extent that is over stated. We all go through the same kinds of challenges as we carve out our own identity as we face the inevitable disappointments. As I learned that my athletic career would never be particularly great, and I'd have to be satisfied with being mediocre. Or when I always thought that there was someone who knew more and could do better in classes that I was concerned with.

I know there are going to be disappointments and challenges for all of you as you face your high school years. But that is part of the process of figuring out who you are, what you can do well, and making your own contribution. Because really, you do now have a wide array of choices. Some of those choices are not good ones. There are more explicit temptations and difficulties confronting you than we did have in our day. We had our own problems, but it does seem that there is so much more that is out there trying to convince you to give up your self esteem, to make the wrong decisions, than there was battering on our doors when we were your age.

So it is challenging for you. And much of what you will become will be related -- not dependent -- because I believe you can make changes in your life at any single point, but it will be related to the choices that you make in the years to come. And I hope that as you think about these choices, you remember some of what you have learned here at Deal. You remember how important it is and how exciting it is to accomplish something. You know, not everybody's going to be a valedictorian -- I wasn't -- not everybody's going to be a star athlete -- I wasn't, that's obvious. But you can figure out what it is you care about. What it is that really gets you up in the morning, that you believe is important to you. And you can do that every single day. Because every single day you have a choice as to how you will react to what life does to you. Lots of times, particularly when you're young you don't have any control over what does happen to you. Unfortunately there are often problems and difficulties that adults toss in your life that you don't deserve. But you do have control over how you will respond. Principal Moss said something

to me that I will always remember. He said looking out at this class, that he knows what you have struggled with, what some of you have had to overcome. Some of the obstacles that have been thrown in your way already. And he said a lot of these students are heroes to me. Because you did get up everyday and keep going.

You have also learned here to honor the responsible choices of others. That is one of the great beauties of living in America, we are not all alike, we do not have all the same experiences, we can -- if we are open to it -- learn from each other and you have had to learn to work together here at this school. I hope that you will carry that lesson with you as you go on from here.

I also hope that you will count your blessings about being an American at this point in our country's history. I was in South Asia just a few weeks ago with my daughter. And we saw things and met people that just opened our eyes. It is humbling, I must say, to shake the hands of men and women who are attempting to lead their countries into more democratic and prosperous futures; who have lost mothers, fathers, and brothers, and sons to assassination, who themselves have been exiled and imprisoned and tortured because they wanted to live more like we live. They wanted the ideals and the vision of what this country stands for. Now have we always fulfilled our own ideals and visions? Of course not! Do we always have to continue to examine where we are and where we're going and try to do a better job? Yes, we do. But the truth is that there has never been a society in our history or at the present time that has tried harder to do what had never been done before to provide opportunity to all people and bring all people together in some common purpose on behalf of our country.

I wish everyone of you could have been with me as I visited a small village outside of LaHore, Pakistan. No electricity, no communication facilities and I walked into a school made of mud and on the blackboard were young women who were going to this village school for the first time that there had ever been education offered and they were struggling as many of you have struggled over algebra. They were doing so without any of the kinds of support and facilities that we take for granted and I thought to myself if only there were a way that every teenager in America could see this in a snapshot to see how people their age in other countries are doing all they can to have just one tenth of the chance for the kind of future that is within the grasp of every one of you.

I know that there are many problems facing our country today and there are many people who do not share the president's and my basic belief in the potential of every single one of you but those people are wrong. They are not even understanding their own

long term interests. It does not help anyone in America to point fingers to stereotype, to place blame, or to shout at one another. Instead we should be working to confront the problems that we have, honestly acknowledge them, and then try to overcome them and there is no more important way of doing that than through the support of education.

It will be especially important in the weeks and months ahead as there is a raging debate in the Congress and throughout the rest of the country about how we will spend the money that our government collects. I hope each of you will raise your voices on behalf of the need to invest in education, invest in the future. That is our surest route to being able to work through the difficulties we face together.

So you will face millions of choices in your life just as our country faces so many important choices today. But I think you have already proven that you are up to that task and you will be able to meet it. And I hope that all who are in this auditorium who have helped you who have provided the guidance and support, the pats on the back, will themselves recognize how well prepared you are. So, congratulations to each of you. Not only for your individual accomplishments, not only for overcoming what I know have been difficult obstacles for some of you, but also for the promise you hold for this community and this country. We are very, very proud of you and look forward to watching with great confidence as you make the choices that are right for yourselves and the rest of us. Thank you all very much. (Applause)

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