

In the Arena

Kennedy Middle School Hall of Fame Induction Speech

I am pleased and honored to be inducted into the Kennedy Middle School Hall of Fame.

This is the first Hall of Fame I've ever been in. No doubt it's also the last one. Thank you so much.

One of the reasons Kennedy Middle School is establishing this Hall of Fame is to let you know that other kids, just like you, have gone through these same halls, had the same kind of teachers, done the same kind of homework, and still survived to have productive, successful, happy lives. And to suggest that you can, in much the same manner, follow in their footsteps.

And, of course, you can.

When I look back on my years in middle school, it occurs to me that I haven't changed very much since then.

In middle school, I liked to read, and I still do. I seldom go anywhere without a book in hand.

In middle school, I liked to be by myself. I didn't hang with any particular crowd. I'm still like that, enjoying an independence of thought that has made my life both interesting and exciting.

In middle school, I liked sports, and I still do. I live for football season, and I still work out almost every day.

By saying that I haven't changed much since middle school, I mean to suggest that you may already have the traits of personality and character, may already have the interests that you will need for success and happiness. Your personality and interests will be different than mine, but they will be equally valuable to you if you will merely explore them, develop them, and learn from them.

From reading, I learned that other people had been curious about the same things as myself, that they had recorded their thoughts and experiences and opened doors of discovery for all of us. Arthur Conan Doyle referred to entering the world of books as going "through the magic door," and I found that to be so. A lifetime of discovery awaits the curious mind in books, journals, magazines and, now, the internet.

From being by myself, I learned the connection between solitude and creativity. I learned to trust my own abilities, and I discovered my capacity for independent work.

From sports, I learned to set goals, and --with my coach, my teacher--learned how to make a plan to achieve those goals.

Sports taught me that when I made a commitment to work hard, to practice correctly and efficiently, and to support my teammates, that I would be successful.

Sports taught me that failure isn't final. In fact, failure is a gift in that it teaches us something we can use to be better prepared for our next competition. The more we fail, the better we become.

Sports also taught me to take risks in trying to be the best. Not crazy, reckless risks, but informed risks in pursuit of your goal. And if I risked and failed, to revise my plan and come back again stronger and better prepared than before.

From sports, then, I learned a strategy for a successful life.

It all came together at NIKE, where a small group of former athletes none of whom knew anything about footwear design, manufacturing or marketing, starting from zero, working independently and together, designed, manufactured and sold enough products to become, after only ten years, the number one athletic shoe company in the world.

That was pretty cool.

What you do here, therefore, is important. It is **not** so important that you get the highest grades, or win all your games. But it **is** important that you value yourself and your teachers, that you learn **how** to find the information that feeds your curiosity, and that you learn **how** to apply yourself like a winner to any task before you. It is important that you risk trying things that you might not be very good at. It is important that you discover that failure is never final, and neither is victory. It is important that you risk being different in pursuit of things that you really care about.

There is a story told about Walt Disney. When he was a young boy, about middle school age, the circus came to his town. There was going to be a parade, and the circus wanted a local boy or girl to lead the parade playing a trumpet. They advertised for someone, and young Walt Disney volunteered.

On the day of the parade, he proudly led the circus through town blowing vainly on his horn: he couldn't play a single note. Afterwards, the organizer asked him, "Why didn't you tell us you couldn't play the trumpet?"

"How would I know?" Disney answered. "I never tried!"

That young boy, willing to take a risk for something he wanted to do, took many more risks in his lifetime, eventually building one of the largest entertainment empires in the world.

When I was here at Kennedy, I cared mostly about being a better athlete; so I tried to improve my conditioning. One of the challenges I set for myself was to get off the school bus each day, a couple of miles from home, and then race it to my stop while a friend held my books.

I couldn't outrun the bus while it was going, of course, but every time it stopped, I'd catch up again. At first, the bus always beat me to my stop. But I improved, and eventually I beat the bus every time.

I know what you're thinking: what a weirdo! But that's just the point. The weirdo who raced the school bus, and who wished more than once that his shoes were just a little lighter and faster, grew up to start NIKE.

If the kids who don't care about being like everyone else, who risk being different because they care passionately about something-- sports, music, art, computers, **anything at all**-- if those kids are weirdos, or nerds, or dweebs, or whatever we call them nowadays then I say: long live weirdos, nerds and dweebs.

If you're one of those kids, **hello!**

If you're not, if you think it's important to be like everyone else, I urge you to reconsider. Seek out the different ones among you. Find out what they're like. Be curious about their interests. I promise you: you will be pleasantly surprised.

I will leave you with these final thoughts and wishes:

Discover and develop your interests.

Set goals for yourself.

Take reasonable risks in pursuit of those goals. Push yourself.

Don't fear failure or setbacks, but learn from them. See them as opportunities to start again with new and better information.

Be comfortable with your differences from other people, and be comfortable with their differences from you. In fact, seek out the different among you, for they have the most to teach you.

Never give up.

Finally, have the courage to be a "good kid." When I was here, life was certainly a lot simpler. My generation had neither the distractions, temptations or opportunities that young people have today. It's a lot harder than it used to be to be a "good kid." A **lot** harder. It takes courage to have your own values, to set your own goals, to make your own choices apart from the crowd.

But there's nothing wrong with courage.

You have one life, and one chance to make it count for something. I hope you will live it with courage and value and direction.

Remember the weird kid who used to race the school bus. He was a pretty good kid. And he grew up to hang out with other "good kids," people like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, people like Marion Jones and Mia Hamm. Good kids who grew up to be heroes, and who deserve to be heroes.

You never know.

Thank you.

by Jeff Johnson, Founding Board Member, In the Arena
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