Good evening Ransom Everglades Class of 2020, parents and faculty.

My name is Natalia Lopez and it is an honor speaking remotely to you as class valedictorian. I know this is not the graduation we envisioned during our orientation in August of 2016, but in the midst of this unprecedented history, it remains just as important to celebrate the tremendous achievement that is graduating high school.

To commence this commencement speech, I would like to recite our unofficial alma mater: "BROOKLYN, BROOKLYN, BROOKLYN."

High school has flown by like a bird. Sometimes it was a penguin, sometimes a hawk. But always a bird. If a penguin is a bird, which I’m not convinced.

Or maybe it didn’t fly by like a bird at all, maybe it was more like a plane. Sometimes it felt like Spirit airlines, other times it felt like Emirates ... especially when lunch rolled around. I don’t think any of us will forget the rush of waiting in line for those crispy, luscious chicken patties. You know anything with the word “patty” in it has to be fine dining. Cow patty. Rice paddy. Peppermint Patty.

But now, as we disembark from this experience that tied us passengers together, we look back and ask ourselves, like a clock factory that caught on fire – Where did all the time go?

We started off as scrambling freshmen. We were nervous. What would happen? Would we pass? Would we pass out? No one knew. And in the blink of an eye, it’s four years later, the bittersweet culmination of all the hard work and diligence that makes Ransom Everglades such a special school.

One thing no one predicted was that we would be educated in the middle of a global pandemic. Nostradamus didn’t say a thing about studying calculus with a virus banging on the windows. COVID-19 took a lot from us, no cap, no gown either. Which is too bad, because how often do you get a chance to wear a gown these days? Sure, if you’re a wizard, or a Victorian ghost. But we’ve all missed a prime gown opportunity. Regardless, these trying times can’t rob us of all the incredible moments we have shared, and it certainly doesn’t diminish how privileged we have been to attend this school together.

To the teachers and faculty, thank you for inspiring us with your unrelenting positivity and dedication. Sometimes I don’t know how you put up with us. I mean, there were mornings I would look in the mirror before school and think, “Even I can’t put up with me.” But you did. And we love you for it. While these have been some of the priciest Google Hangouts in written history, the school’s commitment to learning and advancing is more evident than ever. We have adapted to extenuating circumstances and we have come out stronger. Students in this school are not only great because of their innate intelligence, but because instructing every one of them is a teacher whose passion for their subject is as contagious as the virus. Dare I say, more contagious. You harnessed the power of the circle in Harkness discussions to push our understanding of material, and you taught us to dig beyond the surface in order to form our own nuanced views. Your work is what makes RE such a powerful school.
To the maintenance, cleaning, and cafeteria staff, your hard work does not go unnoticed. We’ve learned a lot, but it seems that picking up plates is still a work in progress. We greatly appreciate everything you do to keep this campus clean, beautiful, and well-fed. I am ... afraid of what it would be without you.

To the parents, we literally would not be here without you. You not only gave us the gift of a great education, but the gift of life. And so much food. If you could pile up next to me all the food my parents have given me, well, it would be disgusting. But it would also be really tall. Thanks for all that food, is what I’m saying. It’s not easy to take a tiny, crying human and turn them into a capable and mature adult, so let today also be a testament to your success. Your unconditional love, support, and guidance through every step has made today, and every instant preceding it, possible. We can’t thank you enough for all the sacrifices you make, and it means the world to be sharing this moment with you.

And now, to the class of 2020, we made it! What a ride it has been. We’ve all grown alongside each other, height-wise but, more importantly, emotionally and intellectually. Our time at RE will never be forgotten, and our resilience as a grade speaks to what an amazing group you all are. We have endured, we have hustled, and now we face college. Do you even remember freshman year? I was two-and-a-half feet tall! Now look at me, pushing seven feet, and I’m not even done growing yet.

My junior year, I took AP Physics. For two weeks. But there was one thing I learned: everything that goes up, must come down. Seniors, right now we are at the top of the food chain; we earned the senior deck and our right to chase away the underclassmen that dare step foot on it. In a couple of months, however, we will find ourselves back at the bottom, in a new jungle. Or at least a new Google Hangout.

But this is not a bad thing, it’s a huge opportunity that we must welcome with open arms. Listening to this right now are some of the most talented, intelligent and creative people I have ever met. Success is inevitable for all of you, but it is important to keep in mind what the path to success looks like. Failure is also inevitable. And that’s completely fine, because it means that you’re trying and as long as you’re trying there’s hope. That’s also exactly what I told myself anytime Mr. Cooper handed back an essay. My point is that all of us will be huge successes, and huge failures. Try to not get too up or too down about either, because neither lasts.

On a more serious note, we are at a turning point in history. Or maybe a turned point. Feels like we’ve gone around some corners that aren’t coming back around, you know? Climate change poses an imminent threat, injustices are being silenced, political parties are becoming increasingly polarized, and we are pushing the limits of technology like never before. There’s also talk about a new Trolls movie, so things are really taking off out there. Now more than ever, it’s crucial that we seize the privilege that has been our education and extend it into the world. This way, we lend a voice to those who may not have been so lucky. Really listen to others, collaborate and cooperate until you find solutions that work for everyone, because they’re out there. We live in a society ... let’s create one that we can all be happy with.

Today is not the end, it’s the beginning of a new chapter. At least I think it is; reading is still very new to me. We have so much to look forward to in the coming years: we’re going to meet all types of new people, explore new hobbies, choose our careers, then choose them again, and again, and again ... For all of you, the future is blindingly bright. Yet while there is so much left to do, make sure to embrace the present. Enjoy the ride, create memories that will make for great stories at parties, memories that you’ll still smile at when you’re 50 reminiscing over your
younger years. If you can remember them. Fifty is really, really old. Right, Dad? And when the going gets tough, because it will, use those memories to remind you of everything that there still is to look forward to.

Now, at the end of this speech, it only feels right to recite the line that welcomed us into the very school we now say goodbye to:

As Paul Ransom describes the “third class of people”: “We are in the world not so much for what we can get out of it, as for what we can put into it.”

Class of 2020: Dream big, stay humble, and I can’t wait to see how each of you transforms this world like the “third class of people” I know you are.

I wish you all the best. Congratulations and thank you for everything!