

Stu Wolpert, 50th Class Reunion Address

Greetings, my dear Classmates...

Congratulations to the GREAT Class of '71 on our 50th anniversary celebration, our "golden anniversary" or 'black & gold' anniversary, I should say.

It is with the utmost regret that I couldn't be with you tonight, on this of ALL nights. And I tried my best to come, but at the eleventh hour it just wasn't possible. But I am here with "yinz" by way of my ridiculously outdated iPhone...

Before I begin, I would like to sincerely thank Chairman Pete Zelinsky, the Reunion Committee, Producers Rick Stacy, Kathy Woodhall and all the volunteers and helpers for their titanic effort, time, diligence and resilience after battling the odds and a persistent Covid foe, which up until just weeks ago was out to spoil our party. So, thank you to all of you for your part in making this grand and historic occasion a reality.

(HOLD UP INDEX CARDS.)

I have here, my speech... No, not the one for 'tonight,' but my speech from our Graduation in 1971... This is really it! On now 'yellow' index cards... And a 'program' from that June night as we sat on the football field, in our caps and gowns, preparing for launch, eager to take on the future...

“Dear Classmates... The Gateway High School Class of 1971 welcomes all of you, parents, relatives, administration, faculty, friends... and my grandmother, Rosie”... I mean, she DID come all the way from Florida...

It goes on to mention the many class accomplishments during our senior year, including adding new and relevant classes to Gateway’s curriculum, plus the dubious addition of the student smoking area... And when the wind was blowing you knew it wasn’t only tobacco being smoked... There’s a mix of platitudes and a ‘famous quotation’ for inspiration... “Life is what we make it.” Good. True. And then comes the line that’s in every graduation speech that was speech ever penned... “Commencement signifies not an end, but a beginning”... Sorry. I know. I’m guilty.

But as we sat poised to throw our caps in the air, we were also contemplating the bigger questions, wondering what life may have in store for us, and where the ‘best parties’ will be tonight?...

We all had similar hopes and dreams for our futures; to have a long, happy life, good health, love, success, families... And tonight, a half century later, we can look back on it all, and ask ourselves how we did on our report cards?

Though we've each taken our separate journeys in life, we've all come away with a common understanding, and that is we've all lived 'a full life.' We've all known love, heartbreak, triumph, failure and hardship, exhilaration, unfathomable pain and tearful joy. 'The ingredients of life lived' and the elixir of wisdom, the bonus, that comes as its natural by-product.

"Calm seas make lousy sailors" said FDR. And everyone here has traversed and navigated the terrain of a fluctuating world that bears little likeness to the one we knew and loved and sometimes pine for. And there's no shame in saying we are products of our time. It was a great time, a sweet time. The best! We had the best music, cars, girls, the 1960 Pirates, our beloved Steelers, and Vincent's Pizza. But today as we look around, we feel like we're in alien territory. And it's not just the usual disorder and chaos that goes with change, but the world feels coarser, less kind and compassionate. And this isn't my Grandmother Rosie talking, though she said the same in her day. It's not generational. It seems different this time. Greed, cheating and people lying freely without consequence has been normalized. I don't know about you but I'm always disappointed when a liar's pants don't actually catch on fire.

That's because our parents, schools and churches did their jobs well. We still carry the belief that justice will prevail and 'good' will out no matter what we see before our eyes. Though we do get a little down from time to time under the weight of it all. We do get to feeling defeated, mentally, physically and spiritually. Sometimes you can get so low that you want to scream... "Help, I've fallen and I can't think of a reason to get up."

But you do. You do because you must.

One thing we've managed to do as seniors -- we've stayed young. We've kept a close watch on our hearts. We've looked after them, tended to them and not let them be corrupted or grow cold. We are still good "Pittsburgh" people, good neighbors, friends and co-workers. We believe in right and honor and continue to live as if the doors of our houses are perpetually unlocked. We've striven to raise our families with proper values, built and lived full and respectable lives. We're proud of what we've done and our places in the world. We made a stand. We've made a difference.

And the underlying reason we're all here tonight is because we've remained "friends." For nothing can ever replace your old friends. There are people in this room we've known since kindergarten.

We're bonded in ways that's hard to put into words. We shared our youth together. We have secrets. We're 'tight.' And as the years pass we find we value and cherish our friendships all the more.

Tonight is a night of celebration, honoring ALL the members of our class for their contributions. And tribute 'should be paid' to the Class of '71 as a whole. And it's not solely to commemorate who we 'were' but for who and what we are today.

This would be the appropriate end point in my address, but something amazing happened on the way to making our 50th reunion that illustrates why we're known in "Gatorland" as "the Great Class of '71." And that is we keep finding "new life in old friendships."

In the fall of 1970 after the class election, our Senior Adviser, Mr. Yount, took me into his office to detail my duties and responsibilities as Class President... "You will attend all school functions, deliver a speech at graduation... And the last thing he said was, "And you will be responsible for all future class reunions." I said, "Sure, great, partyyyy!!" Who could imagine fifty years later that would mean throwing our big 50th bash during a life-threatening global pandemic. Then I remembered that quote from graduation night -- "Life is what we make it." And such is life, so we rolled up our sleeves and went to work, as did Covid-19 with its nasty cousins, Delta and Omicron...

Starts, stops, new waves, new variants, more starts, postponements... it looked like "Zoom 50th reunion, here we come!!"...

But the class rallied. We went to "the mattresses." Everybody started pitching in, stepping up, volunteering... There was a "put me in, Coach" attitude happening... Pete, Rick, Woody, Tommy, Peggy, Kathy Mac, Sharon, Barb, Bernie, Rick Shrum, Rick Sloan, all the Ricks...

It was a group effort that began to feel like the 'old days', all working together on a 'class project.'

Against all odds, on every front, our class, now pushing seventy, and in varying states of health, infirmity and general crankiness, waged a 'holy war' against a fearsome nemesis and won the day. We're having our moment. And some cool moment it is. And it's not only the past we're celebrating tonight, but the 'now.' We're not relics, but a living, thriving, ever changing and growing entity. The 'Class of '71' is reinventing itself. There's life in these Gators! So take that, Mr. Covid-Omicron/Delta... We Gators came, we saw, we "partyyyed!"

We made an awesome 50th, put on a helluva show with 'costumes from the barn' and had a blast doing it, so go to hell!

After fifty years since graduation, I officially declare, that on this milestone occasion, I say to you that "The State of our Union is SOUND. DAMN SOUND!"

A few last words and thank you's to the people who also played an important part of our Gateway experience; our bus drivers, safety patrols, our librarians, school nurses, custodians and the hair-netted lunch ladies who served us hot meals every day, especially that apple crisp for dessert that I've never had as good since.

On a personal note, I would like to say it's been an honor and my absolute pleasure to have served as your Class President. And after fifty years only 'one' assassination attempt... Yeah, a disgruntled student throwing snowballs from the 'grassy knoll' by the library...

And they say there was a "second" snowball thrower.

I am grateful to have traveled this journey with you.

And as we go forward, dear classmates, all six hundred and fifty-three of us, you can feel happy and proud to know you have lived up to our 'rep' as "The GREAT Class of 1971."

We did it. We made it. All of us, together, now.

(RAISE GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE).

I love you all. Happy 50th anniversary, everyone!

(TOASTING.)

And go Gators!!

