

Chicago Jesuit Academy
Inaugural Commencement Address
By Mr. Brian Lewis

Mr. Lewis was introduced by Matthew Lynch, the president of Chicago Jesuit Academy, with these words:

“I am pleased to introduce as our inaugural commencement speaker, Mr. Brian Lewis, a good friend and a Chicago Jesuit Academy board member. Brian is currently an Assistant United States Attorney in the San Francisco criminal division. He was formerly a litigation associate at Reed Smith here in Chicago, having focused his practice on intellectual property and product liability matters. Prior to working for Reed Smith, he clerked for the Honorable Richard W. Roberts in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. He holds a law degree from Georgetown, where he was editor-in-chief of the American Criminal Law Review. He earned his B.A. from Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and his high school diploma is from St. Ignatius College Prep where he was also a LINK Scholar.



“Brian is tough, smart and – like our current President – he even has a decent jumpshot. More importantly, he has a moral compass that points unyieldingly toward true North. He is a loving husband and the father of a beautiful little girl. When he sees that which is unjust in this world, he takes thoughtful, constructive action. He surrounds himself with good friends who are similarly inclined toward hard work, justice and thoughtful discernment. He is a model of what we ask each of our students at Chicago Jesuit Academy to be: He is a gentleman for others in the Jesuit tradition who is open to growth, loving, religious, intellectually competent and committed to doing justice in the service of others. I am proud to call him my friend. Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Brian Lewis...”

Matthew, thank you for that generous introduction. If you hadn’t mentioned me by name, I’m not sure I would have known you were talking about me.

To the class of 2009, it is my honor and privilege to be here today and to join your parents, your family members, and your teachers in saying “Congratulations on a job well done.”

Much has been asked of you since your first day at the Chicago Jesuit Academy. And while the people gathered in this room tonight worked hard to provide you the opportunity for an education at CJA, it was each of **you** that seized that opportunity.

It was you who got up every morning to make it to school by 7:30. It was you who stayed every school night until 6 p.m. You put in the work to finish your assignments. You read the books. You took the tests. You brought your reading scores from where they were to well above your current grade level. You pushed yourself to work harder than you ever had before. And, impressively, you did all that while wearing ties. And for these accomplishments, graduates, you are to be congratulated!

I have to confess that I am particularly happy to be here tonight because I am not so different than you. As Matthew mentioned, I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. I attended a small Catholic school on the South Side that, like CJA, had a dedicated group of educators determined to give their students every opportunity to succeed. With the help of a LINK Unlimited scholarship, I attended high school right here at St. Ignatius College Prep.

After Ignatius, I headed east and earned degrees from Princeton University and Georgetown University Law Center. I clerked for a U.S. District Court Judge in Washington, DC and then moved to Chicago

where I worked for one of the largest international law firms in the world. I am currently an Assistant United States Attorney in San Francisco, California and it is my distinct honor to represent the people of San Francisco against the criminals who attempt to prey on them. Basically, wire taps, cell phone tracking, and generally busting bad guys is what I do.

Now, I'm not telling you this stuff to show off or to show out. I'm telling you this because I am not so different than you, and along my journey I've learned a few lessons that I want to impart to you today as you continue on your own journeys. Don't worry. There are only four.

Lesson One: Work Hard.

There is no substitute for hard work. Plain and simple. It was true at CJA and it will be true at Ignatius and Loyola and Culver and Walter Payton. It's true for your parents and it's true for me. As a lawyer, much of my day is spent reading. Despite that, I have a rule. I read everything at least twice. So, when you get to school next fall, do your homework, then check it to make sure it's right. Complete your reading assignments, then re-read them to make sure you really understand them. If the basketball coach tells you to shoot 50 free throws to help improve your percentage from the line, shoot 100. Hard work is the sole path to excellence. That's Lesson One.

Lesson Two: Push Yourself.

You never know what you are capable of until you try. And you never know what you are missing unless you get out of your comfort zone. High school will open new, exciting, and different opportunities for you. Seize them. Make some friends from the North Side. Make some friends from the Suburbs. Join the Chess Club. Go on a Ski Trip. Try out for the soccer team. That's Lesson Two.

Lesson Three: Never Fear Failure.

This is closely related to Lesson Two. You will not be surprised to learn that pushing yourself to learn new things will often result in some initial stumbles. Frankly, that can't be avoided. But, you have to push yourself despite the prospect of failure. My advice to you, learn to laugh at yourself. Our task is not to be perfect, it's to be the best we can be. If you don't even show up and don't even try, you can't reach your full potential. Now, gentlemen, I'm gonna be honest with you. Never fearing failure will come in handy when school dances and proms come around and you need to find the courage to ask someone to go with you. Plus, you have an advantage I didn't – President Obama has made it a little cooler to be the smart black kid in class. That's a big improvement over Steve Urkel. Trust me. That's Lesson Three.

Lesson Four: Always Try to Do the Right Thing.

Your families and CJA have instilled in you a simple, but powerful principle. Do unto others as you would have them do unto to you. Never let that go. High school will be an exciting time for you, but also a challenging time as you find yourselves in new situations both academically and socially. As you navigate the next four years, keep your own moral compasses close. Be respectful. Be earnest. Be kind. Be generous. Those are the hallmarks of manhood. Join a tutoring program to help neighborhood kids. Befriend a classmate who might not have many friends. Participate in service projects to make your community a better place. That's Lesson Four.

Finally, let me leave you with this. As the inaugural graduating class, you have and will always have a special status here at CJA. No other class will be the first set of graduates from this institution. You, of course, have earned this honor. But, I must tell you that this special status comes with a little bit of responsibility. Future graduating classes will look directly to you to see what they can accomplish. So, graduates, I challenge you to set the bar high for those who will come after you. And when future CJA students come to you to ask how they can be like you, I hope you'll tell them that if they work hard, push themselves, never fear failure, and always try to do the right thing, the sky is their only limit.

Thank you, congratulations again, and I look forward to seeing all the great things you're going to do.