

OPENING DAY SPEECH

September 2, 2008

Last year was another great year for North Colonie. One of the highlights was the annexation of Maplewood School. I know you join me in welcoming our new colleagues. I wish to celebrate the work done by all of you on behalf of our students. A number of these accomplishments are listed on the screen:

- Blue Creek received a “School of Character” award from the Academy for Character Education at the Sage Colleges
- Eileen Satterlee received a Teacher Educator Leadership Award from the Academy for Character Education
- Singer/Songwriter Brian Chevalier wrote and recorded songs with Blue Creek students
- Carmine’s Kitchen recorded an episode in the Blue Creek Kitchen
- The Blue Creek Wellness Committee began
- Over 26 families received gifts and food during the holidays from district faculty, staff, and administrators; nearly 120 students raise over \$6800 for St. Jude's Children's Hospital by participating in a Math-a-Thon; several collections of school supplies and toys were donated to our "adopted" Air National Guard Unit to be sent to children in Afghanistan by Boght Hills’ students
- Boght Hills’ 6th grade students volunteered their time in service as library helpers and kindergarten bus buddies
- Boght Hills students volunteered as book buddies for younger students
- Chinese Acrobats performed at Boght Hills
- Children's author, David Schwartz, visited Boght Hills
- Boght Hills was proud of their relationship with CYC and the TOC library that provided a grant for books for the afterschool program and an international storyteller
- Forts Ferry held a successful Science Fair
- Forts Ferry held a “*Kids are Runners Too*” program
- Author and illustrator, David Ross, visited Forts Ferry
- Forts Ferry had a successful Carnival
- Monthly character education assemblies were conducted at Latham Ridge

- Latham Ridge students participated in the national “Mix-It-Up at Lunch Day”
- Latham Ridge held a Discovery Fair and a Harvest Fest
- Loudonville was nominated for National Blue Ribbon School recognition
- An Outdoor Ecology Learning Lab was created at Loudonville
- Loudonville held its annual Science Fair
- Maplewood received a grant from New York State Alliance for Arts to promote Arts in Education
- 4th grade Maplewood students participated in The Times Union Stock Market Game
- The Zucchini Brothers wrote songs with Maplewood students to help build their self-esteem
- Maplewood received a Child Abduction Prevention Grant from the New York State Education Department
- Maplewood 8th grades student, Rachel Meyer, received the top speaker award in New York State at High School Level II in Russian at the Olympiad of Spoken Russian at the University at Albany
- Maplewood held a Psychedelic Sixties concert
- The District Writing Committee developed “Writerly Life” units in each of the elementary grades
- The District Spelling Committee was created
- A new reading assessment was selected for grades 3 – 6
- Southgate held an Environmental Fair
- The new Southgate playground was completed
- Southgate fifth grade students enjoyed an interdisciplinary field trip to Tang Museum at Skidmore College
- A guest electric violinist performed classical music at Southgate
- Food drives were held at Southgate that benefited local food pantries
- Southgate organized a supply drive for a school in Africa
- The elementary foreign language program was approved and is ready to be implemented
- The percentages of students earning scores of Levels III/IV on all grade 7 and grade 8 NYS assessments increased
- 100% of 8th grade students passed the foreign language proficiency exams for second year in a row
- The Block Support Aide program at Shaker Junior High School was expanded

- A new, expanded At Risk program at Shaker Junior High School was approved
- A character education presentation was made Sister Anne Smollin to 9th and 10th graders at Shaker High School
- A WRAP program was presented to all 9-12 grade students
- Exchange programs were held with students from France, Russia, and Quebec
- Anjali Puttachi became a Science Research Intel Finalist
- Prestigious recognitions were received by Shaker High School students in both the National French contest and the National Russian Exam
- A Shaker sophomore won a trip to Germany based on his National German Exam, and two students of Russian were selected to receive a 2008 Moscow Summer School Scholarship Award to study and travel to Russia
- One hundred percent of Shaker students passed the NYS Proficiency examination with 90% achieving the mastery level (85% and above)
- One hundred percent of Shaker students passed on the NYS Regents exams with 83% achieving the mastery level (85% and above)
- Forty-nine percent of the 2008 graduating class completed 5 years of foreign language study
- Four hundred and ninety seven students enrolled in the University in the High School courses; one hundred and ninety of our graduating seniors earned 8 to 10 college credits for their foreign language study
- A Shaker High School Key Club member was elected a National Key Club Governor
- The Broadcast Media Club competed in the “How Cool Is Your School” competition
- An AFS National Weekend was hosted by Shaker High School
- The Math Department held “Pi Day”
- A successful Math Club Peer Mentoring Program was in operation
- Shaker High School continued participation in the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE)
- Poetry Out Loud Shaker High School student, Genevieve Mailloux, was the State representative in the National Poetry Out Loud Recitation Contest

- A student athlete was chosen as semifinalist for the Scholars' Recognition Program
- Shaker High School was recognized by Newsweek as a top high school in the nation
- Planning for the 50th Anniversary celebration for Shaker High School began
- Through our Transition Grant, the number of applications to VESID from our students increased from 16 to 70 and an increased number of agencies now work with our students
- 406 students performed NYSSMA solos and ensembles
- A record number of 5th and 6th grade students attended New York City Ballet and Philadelphia Orchestra performances at SPAC
- The Parillo Piano Competition winners were all from North Colonie
- A record number of high school seniors continued in music
- 3 high school students performed in All-State music groups
- Junior high music groups received Gold and Platinum medals at the Great East Music Festival
- The Southgate Select Chorus was awarded a NYSSMA Silver medal
- Music and art teachers collaborated on valentines for nursing home residents at the elementary level, on an Udu drum project at the junior high, and on the Norman Rockwell Suite at high school
- Music students were accepted into NYSBDA State Honor ensembles
- "Hello Dolly!" was performed at Shaker High School
- "Once Upon a Mattress" was performed at Shaker Junior High School
- Grade level musicals at all the elementary schools were huge successes
- 48 students were recognized as Physical Education Leadership Award winners
- Two Shaker High School students were among 170 recognized at Capital Region Scholar Athlete Awards and for the 2nd year in a row Shaker had a student recognized as 1st runner up
- Three seniors were recognized by the American Alliance of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance as Capital Zone Secondary P.E. winners

- 22 Varsity teams were recognized by New York State Public High School Athletic Association as Scholar Athlete Teams
 - Girls' Varsity Soccer was the Suburban Council Champion
 - Boys' Varsity Cross-Country was the Suburban Council Champion
 - 6 high school athletes received All-American recognition
 - The Transportation Department worked cooperatively with other districts to transport students
 - A new traffic pattern was established at the high school
 - Bus mechanic, Wes Snyder, returned from service in Iraq
 - The Transportation Department achieved a 97.28% passing rate on inspections from New York State Department of Transportation
 - Technology literacy skills increased for students
 - Web-based access to resources was increased
 - Software tools to create interactive technology projects, including audio and video podcasting became much more accessible to students and teachers
 - Making it work - support for infrastructure, equipment and technical assistance increased
 - Computer upgrades occurred in labs and classrooms
 - Better access to presentation tools, projectors, Smartboards, document cameras took place
 - Greater access to new instructional software tools in each school occurred
 - More on-line tools for professional development, web page creation, and online course creation were developed
 - Better wireless coverage occurred in all schools
 - Instructional support from the Technology Resource Teachers in each building was enhanced
- (*By the way, this talk will be available later today as a podcast)
- Professional development through Gary Cimorelli and NCCS courses took place
 - Technical support from technology assistants, computer room aides, and the IT Direct work system increased
 - Elementary Web Page student art gallery was completed for each school
 - Frank Giorgini, ceramic artist, worked with Accelerated Studio Art students at the Shaker Junior High School

- Elementary Art Explorers enjoyed field trip experience to the Empire State Plaza contemporary art collection
- College credit was offered for the first time to Jewelry and Stained Glass students at the high school
- Several winners at Olympics of the Visual Arts were from Shaker High School and Shaker Junior High School
- Our high school summer school results were very positive
- Record number of student internships were completed in local businesses
- A new Clothing Design and Construction course was designed
- Increasing numbers of students signed up to begin our pre-engineering program
- The Principles of Engineering courses were rewritten this summer

And to add to this remarkable list, 96% of our graduates earned Regents diplomas, and 69% of our students with disabilities earned Regents diplomas. These are wonderful accomplishments, and they are the result of all of the efforts of staff members at all grade levels. I applaud you.

It is now with great pleasure that I introduce our new North Colonie faculty members. I will call you by groups. Please hold your applause until all names in a group are called. As I call your name, please stand and remain standing. I also want to recognize our graduate interns, master level special education teacher interns, and psychology interns.

I would like to thank all of you who are serving as mentors for the 2008-2009 school year, those who participated in the August skit, as well as those of you who have participated in the mentorship program in past years. Would you all please stand and be recognized? Special thanks go to Dimitri Vasilakis, Judi Stott, and Joe Corr for their leadership in this program that is jointly sponsored by North Colonie Teachers' Association and the district.

The summer of 2008 was marked by the most extensive amount of summer curriculum work done in the history of North Colonie. Over 270 teachers participated in 58 workshops across all content areas in grades K-12. Extensive work was done with our new teaching staff preparing them to teach the balanced literacy program in grades K-6. Our foreign language faculty worked vigorously with Galina Kats in developing our new elementary foreign language program for grades 5-6. In the area of technology, our K-12 staff worked with Gary Cimorelli and Liz McNamara

on refining and honing their skills on a variety of new technology areas to get our staff ready for the exciting world of Web 2.0. Not only are these staff members excited about using these new applications in their classroom, but they are also invigorated to share them with their colleagues. Writing continued to be a strong focus of attention for the district. Nearly 30 teachers met over five half-days this summer to begin the process of mapping curriculum for writing in grades K-6. In other areas across the curriculum including special education, math, science, English language arts, social studies, health, special education, and physical education, teachers worked on a variety of tasks all intended to improve the delivery of instruction. We continue to be most proud of our commitment to continued research and implementation of best teaching practices and are dedicated to the process of growth and renewal that occurs as a result of our summer curriculum efforts.

This past year the Globalization Task Force continued its work. Literature groups met to discuss two books, one about a racially mixed high school and the other about a humanitarian campaign staged in the Taliban's own backyard. The books, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" by Beverly Daniel Tatum, and Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin led to rich and riveting discussions. This year we plan to also continue our study circles and to offer faculty, community members, and students the opportunity to further explore cultural issues. More information can be found in the district staff development resource booklet.

The spring and summer of 2008 provide a story of hope, lost and then found, for my family. My son Eric who had brain cancer in 1991 and a recurrence in 2004 fell ill again this spring. He was in the hospital in Washington, D.C. for over three months.

While in the hospital waiting to begin experimental treatments to reduce the brain swelling that might cause him to die, he had one massive infection after another, including a potentially fatal blood infection. Either my husband or I, and sometimes both of us, were in Washington every weekend and in some weeks, during the week, for the past several months to help Eric, advocate for him as he was bedridden in the hospital, and support his young family by just being there.

There were times when none of us saw the light of day, spending days and nights, by his side. We looked forward progress when there was

none. Eric's spirits were lower than I had ever seen, a combination of fear that he would not regain use of the left side of his body and reaction to the massive quantity of steroids that he was taking. He truly was living in the heart of darkness.

We all wondered if Eric would be around to see the birth of his second child, due in early November.

Then one day, two and a half months into this ordeal, Eric made a joke with me on the phone, and I heard a little life and spirit in his voice. The joke buoyed my spirits. The same day my husband recounted a story of Eric's nurse, a woman from Sierra Leone, who believes in prayer, and said to my husband: "Under my care, he will get better." Shortly thereafter, Eric was out of bed and in a chair for the first time in a very long time. That was the first time I truly heard my husband sounding genuinely hopeful. The nurse conveyed hope for a better tomorrow, and this was a message our family so desperately needed to hear.

I think of all the parents who send their children to us hoping for bright futures. I know of a high school student whose mother hoped that by her daughter's summer school attendance she would raise the rather low grade she had gotten at the end of the school year in a particular class. When I spoke to the mother halfway through the course, she reported that her daughter had a 100.6% average in the summer school class. After our laugh at that number, I heard great hope in the mother's voice. She always knew that her daughter could achieve more than she had been seeing, but she had begun to have real doubts. Our summer school teacher gave mother and daughter confidence, much hope, and a sense that this young woman could accomplish more and become a real student.

Each year as I speak with our special education administrators, I hear pride in their voices as they describe the high percentage of special education students who walk across the stage at graduation time from high school with Regents diplomas. One of them spoke to me this summer about the number of special education students who earned advanced Regents diplomas. A number of years ago individuals here had the idea that this was possible, and it is now a North Colonie reality for a number of our special education students. When we all have hope and high expectations, we can dream big dreams.

Hope is also at the heart of a large number of special programs that have been designed over the years in our district such as the Kindergarten Improvement Program (K.I.P.), the Integrated Regents Program (I.R.P.), and the Personal Intervention Improvement Program (P.I.I.P.). This coming year, with the expansion of the junior high FOCUS program and the initiation of the Response to Intervention for Successful Education (R.I.S.E.) program for at risk students at Shaker High School, we are hopeful that more “at risk” students will be noticed, mentored, and, consequently, successful.

Sometimes, all we can offer is hope. Sometimes, it is the most powerful thing we can offer. It fuels people’s dreams; it gives courage.

So how do I now shamelessly work into my talk this year the grandchildren’s pictures? Those of you who are not new to North Colonic know now that it is clearly going to happen. During dark times this summer, when I was spending most of my time when I was in Washington with my son Eric, my grandson Noah, now 4½ years old, told his mother, “Grandma loves Eric more than me.” After that report, I made sure to focus a little additional love (and attention) on my little buddy. Pictured here are Noah, his brother Zachary (7 months), and Eric and his daughter, Talia, now 3 years of age. The grandchildren fill our lives with laughter, joy, and hope.



It is with great sadness that I now add that Eric died this summer, on August 11, while a patient at George Washington University Hospital. He left behind a legacy of much love, joyous laughter, and indomitable courage as he waged a valiant battle against the illness that he had had since he was nineteen years of age. For our family, he was our incredible dear friend, brother, son, husband, and father. He was also, to a tremendous extent, our hero. Eric's favorite song was the theme to "Rocky" that you hear playing in the background.



I wish you all a wonderful school year, one in which your hopes and your hopes for our students are fulfilled. In that spirit, I dedicate our opening day song to all of you. The song, "Hero" is sung for us by Shaker Junior High School eighth grade student, Bridgette Guerrette, accompanied by Dimitri Vasilakis.

