

# What We Talk About When We Talk About the St. Andrew's Family

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*This talk was given by St. Andrew's math teacher and alum Amanda Gahagan '11 at the 2019 VI Form Dinner. Each year, the VI Form Dinner welcomes soon-to-graduate seniors to St. Andrew's alumni family.*

Some of you may know that these are also my last few weeks at St. Andrew's. Just like all of you, it is time for me to start the next chapter of my life. When I first started working here in January of 2016, you were all just freshmen, preparing for your first round of midterms. Now you are seniors who will leave a profound and lasting impact on the culture of St. Andrew's. In many ways I have also felt like a graduating senior. Throughout the spring I have found myself getting nostalgic and emotional about leaving SAS. Maybe some of you can relate to this. From getting overwhelmed and teary at Arts Weekend, to crying at our lacrosse end of the season celebration (even though Noor [El-Baradie '19] doesn't think I cry!), to just sitting on the front lawn with [my dog] Tuukka reflecting on our time here, I have felt the mix of emotions that comes with change. When Mr. Roach asked me to give this talk, it kicked my reflection into overdrive. I was desperately trying to figure out what might be the essential truth of St. Andrew's or of being an SAS alumna. I tried to conjure up the most profound or sage piece of advice. How could I possibly narrow down all my thoughts and risk diluting them, just to get one sentence or phrase? It certainly felt like a mission doomed to fail. What I have come up with seems slightly incomplete, yet actually fitting. For as cheesy as it sounds, your time at St. Andrew's is similarly incomplete. This is not the end. Although I am all at once sad, happy, excited, and reflective about leaving St. Andrew's, I am not nervous or scared because I know what comes next. I know what happens when you leave St. Andrew's and I hope to share some of that with you tonight.

The first thing I know for certain about leaving St. Andrew's is that your friendships will only strengthen. People who you may not have been close

with while you were here can become your rock in your next chapter. I have a classmate named Jerome Wright '11. Geographically, he was the closest St. Andrean to me throughout college; he was at Boston College and I was at Babson, about 20 minutes down the road. I would say that we were certainly friends while at SAS, but not necessarily best friends. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas of our freshman year in college, I saw on Facebook that Jerome was posting about a performance that he was going to be in. He had joined the all-male step team at BC called Sexual Chocolate. I texted him and asked if I could come support him, not necessarily knowing what it was. So one Tuesday night, my friend and I drove to Boston College and found our seats in the large auditorium. At this point, I knew Jerome as a somewhat quiet but very hardworking student-athlete, who definitely had a jokester side but that often was only around the guys. The concert began, and I could not believe what I was watching. Jerome was not only acting as if he had been an actor his entire life, but he was also performing routine after routine of steps that showed professionalism, expertise, character and heart. I immediately transformed into a proud and slightly crazy stage mom: crying, screaming and occasionally yelling, "I know him!" I was in awe of Jerome's confidence, skill, talent, and overwhelming joy as he performed on the stage with his team. This was something I had never seen from him at St. Andrew's. I waited for him after the show and when he came through the doors backstage, I nearly tackled him. He was embarrassed that I was crying so much but I couldn't help the love and pride that was flowing from me. We were able to chat and catch up and about every five minutes, I would look at him and say, "I can't believe you just did that!" I went to every one of his shows for the next four years, and I made my friends and teammates come support him too, because that is what St. Andreans do. This was the foundation for the next four years of college in Boston and a friendship that was elevated to a whole new level. Whenever I needed family, someone who understood me, a laugh—I would call Jerome, and we would go grab food and hang out as long as we could. He doesn't know how much his friendship meant to me and helped me get through college. There were no St. Andreans at Babson... and there is never a sufficient replacement for a St. Andrean. You have to go to the source! As you go through college and life, the people who are around you right now will

be with you every step of the way. You will continue to support each other and have overwhelming pride for their accomplishments as if they are your own. Because of this, your relationships will grow and flourish in ways that you could never know.

Another thing that I know for certain about leaving St. Andrew's is that you will find St. Andreans all over the country and the world, and it is always magical when you find them. Although our campus is stunning and unforgettable, it is truly the people who make the place what it is. When you come across a St. Andrean outside of 350 Noxontown Road, you will be instantly transported to this place and the feeling of love and community.

A few more stories:

The summer after my freshman year of college, I was working at a restaurant in the financial district of Boston. One night, the owner needed extra help at his other restaurant, which was located over by MIT, so that night I found myself walking back to my car from this restaurant, where I did not usually work, in an area of the city that I rarely went to. As I was walking, there was a woman coming towards me. I was, of course, looking at my phone and maybe not paying close attention to others on the sidewalk. As she got closer, I realized that it was Devin Duprey, who I had not seen since she graduated from St. Andrew's in 2010. Now, I'm not sure if Devin even knows this, but that summer had been particularly difficult for me personally, and I felt a bit lost and alone in Boston. I had thrown myself entirely into the restaurant life and was working crazy hours. It was complete serendipity that we ran into each other that day and it left me feeling lifted, loved, and seen. It filled me up when I needed it and gave me strength for the rest of the summer. Moments like this continued throughout college and beyond.

My advisor during my sophomore year at St Andrew's surprised me three years later at one of my lacrosse games during my freshman season at Babson. I had torn my ACL early in the season, so I was on the sidelines for a tough game against Endicott. After the game, I was walking off the field with

all my gear and I looked at the fence where many parents are waiting. As I scanned the faces, I suddenly saw two that I recognized. Standing at the opening of the fence were Ben and Christina Kennedy with their new baby. Ben, a Class of 1997 SAS alum, and Christina were both former faculty who had deeply impacted my time as a student here. I had no idea they were going to be there, so the surprise mixed with all the love and unwavering support of course forced me to tears and excitement. My teammates couldn't understand why I was freaking out. Although my lacrosse team had met my real parents several times, I was trying to reassure them through tears and snot: "Don't worry, these are my parents!" They didn't quite understand.

When I was studying abroad my junior fall in Manchester, England, I visited my best friend from St. Andrew's for her birthday while she was studying abroad in Florence, Italy. Her friends from her program were surprised that I had travelled that far for a birthday. To Elizabeth and I, it was a no-brainer. No matter where in the world these moments occurred, I was always left with the same feeling; love, support, pride, belonging, deep understanding, and connection. You can and will find St. Andreans all over the world, and the feeling of seeing and connecting with them will always be the same: the feeling of love and understanding at its deepest and most profound level.

As some of you know, I hope to study psychology in graduate school, and so it seems appropriate that I quote my favorite psychologist, Brene Brown. She says,

*"We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection. Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of the them—we can only love others as much as we love ourselves."*

St. Andrew's is unlike any place on earth because here we are deeply seen and known for our truest selves. We grow love from our community of trust, respect, kindness, and affection. I believe St. Andrew's teaches us to find the truest and most honest version of ourselves and to live wholeheartedly in that version without fear or shame. We take this with us into the world beyond St. Andrew's and we are drawn to people who are doing the same. This is truly the greatest gift we have been given by St. Andrew's School.

The last thing that I know for certain about leaving St. Andrew's is that you are joining a very inviting, loving, open, and warm alumni family. I was told this exact same thing at this dinner in 2011. I didn't take those words to heart in that moment, but it has been one of the many joys of graduating from St. Andrew's. Not only will you reconnect with alums who you shared time with while at SAS, but you will also meet other generations of St. Andreans who are excited to know you and create that unspoken and unwavering connection. Think about Move-In Day at the beginning of this year. All 83 of you were beyond excited to welcome our new students to this magical place. Well, you will experience a very similar moment, except over 2000 people are eagerly waiting for you! When you return for your first five year reunion, you will meet others in your Reunion cycle of all ages, and you will share this amazing bond that is unexpected and yet very familiar. Next Sunday is not the end... but rather the beginning of a journey with an ever-growing family.

If I had to distill all my thoughts and reflections into one thing, it would be that St. Andrew's did not teach you how to fit in, but rather to belong. As you move onto the next four years of college and beyond, remember that you, the truest version of you, belong in this world and the St. Andrew's alumni family is always there to remind you of that exact fact. Tonight, you take your first step into the alumni body by accepting your ties and charms. Know that one week from today, although you may have some tearful goodbyes on the Front Lawn with beloved teachers and underclassmen, the massive SAS alumni family will be welcoming you with open arms. You don't know us all yet, but we are pretty

awesome and you can find us anywhere you might go. It is my honor and pleasure to say to you tonight, Class of 2019, welcome to the fam!!