

Archway Academy Valedictorian Address

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Today is an amazing day for all of us. Many of us graduates as well as family members never thought this day would come. We were hopeless and through our addictions had lost our lives. We all came from the kind of life no one wants to live. Graduating high school was not high on our priorities and became almost an impossible idea. Now not only are we all here to celebrate this achievement but we are happy to be here knowing we have overcome what a lot of addicts do not. We have worked so hard not just academically but emotionally too. Before, being in the same room as our families was a challenge and now we are so proud to have them here sharing this part of our lives with us. This is not just a high school graduation; this is a celebration of growth, of overcoming obstacles, of discovering ourselves, and of learning how to deal with life. All of these are things that we have learned through the help of our families, friends, and Archway.

I know that I would be in a very different place today if it wasn't for these people. I started using when I was 13 and my mom and I moved to College Station. I had always felt like an outsider looking in and was an acceptance seeker at an early age but when we moved away from Arlington, I thought my life was over. I literally thought I was moving into hell. I quickly picked up using as a hobby out of boredom and dissatisfaction for my life. Things got bad pretty quick. I instantly was a different person. Most of the time I felt like just the empty shell of a person. All self esteem and self worth went out the window. I just didn't care anymore. I hurt my

family and friends and pushed everyone away from me unless they were being used to blame something on. I ended up living out of my house for a while, being sent to relatives for a while, and finally returning home to find my house broken into by my 'friends'. This was a big turning point for me. I became depressed, angry, violent, and most of all resentful. I hated everyone and anyone that I didn't hate got sick of how angry I was. A lot of friends stopped hanging out with me because of how out of control I was. So needless to say, I was left with very few people who still would call themselves my friends. I knew at this point that if something didn't change soon I wasn't going to make it out of high school. My mother and I thought the change that needed to happen was geographical. We moved to the Woodlands to get away but it didn't take long for me to realize that I had nothing and no one to blame anymore for my misery. I was the problem. I finally asked for help and God placed meetings and Cornerstone into my life. Being sober was extremely difficult when I found out that not only did I have to quit using, but I had to quit guys, stealing, lying, manipulating, and all sorts of other addictions I used to cope. I didn't know if I wanted to be sober but I was willing to do anything to make myself feel better and this is the only thing I ever tried that worked. I slowly got self esteem; I became happy; and most of all, I felt free.

Sobriety was not my only challenge, as much as I complain about school, I had to do a lot to come here. I went to public school my whole life, when I got sober I continued to go for my first 4 months of sobriety and it was extremely difficult. I quickly found out that I just wasn't ready at that point to be in the kind of environment where half of the kids are on dope. So then I tried home school. That was a disaster because although the idea is good, it is just nearly impossible to teach yourself and have that kind of self discipline. I had to complain to my mom

for months before I was finally allowed to come to Archway. But coming to Archway isn't exactly easy either for a lot of us. At least us in the Woodlands wake up at 5:30am to take a 6:10am bus that drops us off downtown right in the middle of weigh station (for those of you who don't know weigh station is a chaotic homeless feeding service the church provides.) So for 50 or 40 min every morning we got to experience all sorts of odd characters and learn valuable lessons such as don't cross the street just because the homeless people do and that panhandling doesn't work very well as a living.

I know all of us graduates have been itching for this day to come for what seems like forever. A lot of us just wanted to get outta here as quick as possible and get high school over with. But what we have here at Archway can't be found at another school. The friendships and memories I have made at Archway will always be treasured, from holding each other up when we were struggling to running around Palmer taking pictures or hearing a speaker during Friday fill up. There is no other school where you are allowed to pray together as a community, then talk about what has been going on in your life in check-in, help feed the homeless, get individual attention in small classes, in some cases work at your own pace, catch up in schoolwork, and have a 12 step meeting all in the same day.

I think I can say that we all are very grateful for Archway today. Archway is more than just a school, it's a community. Everyone, Sasha, Becky, Tammer, Sally, Brooke, Ms. Wu, Mr. Smith, Mr. Anderson, Mr. Holloway, Mr. Araniva, Mr. Sanborn, Mr. Seriale, Ms. Norman, Ms. Armwood, and Mrs. Aquil have not just helped us get an education but have taught us how to live. Everything in our lives up until now has been preparing us for the real world. We had to

learn how to treat others, deal with relationships, friends, our parents, and the people around us. Now we know. I am very well prepared for the next chapter in my life because I've have been taught by the best teachers. I now have the freedom to go in whatever direction I want to.

For a long time I didn't have a choice. It seemed as if my whole life was laid out for me and prescribed through my addiction. Now I have no limits. So thank you again for our families, friends, and Archway for not just giving us support but showing us the way. I specifically want to give a shout out to my mom for supporting me through everything, she stayed by my side and loved me when I did not love myself and was always willing to go to any lengths to help me get better; my brother Zack, who can't be here today, my sister Larissa for putting up with me as a little sister, as well as all the other family and friends who have come to share this exciting moment in my life with me.

The friends I've made in recovery are like my family and I consider many as my brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. I have gotten so much more than I ever dreamed of out of sobriety. I am no longer on the sidelines of my own life. I am a participant. I awakened from Cornerstone and now I am graduating Archway! In the fall I am going to the University of Texas where I am planning on getting involved with the recovery program run by UT and continue going to meetings. I cannot wait for this next step of life of moving out and going to college. I know that it will be challenging and hard at times but with that pain also comes growth. Recovery has mended my relationships and my life and by the grace of god I have 2 years 4 months and 5 days sober today.

So I know that we are all very anxious to get our diplomas before the Archway staff changes their minds so I'll end with this; after all that we have been through, our perseverance has finally paid off, we have made it to the other side. At my house I have these inspirational coffee mugs that are really nice to read when I'm trying to chug enough coffee to stay functional enough to make the scenic trip downtown that I was talking about earlier. One of these cups has a proverb on it that says "just when the caterpillar thought the world was over; it became a butterfly." Just like now when it seems like graduating high school and our APG's is the end, it is only the end of what we know. Whether we go on to college or straight to the working world the future is now in our hands. As Ghandi put it when he wrote on another one of my coffee cups, "be the change you want to see in the world," and that's what we are doing today. We are not the norm of our kind. We are all the exception. People like us are not supposed to make it this far. We aren't supposed to find a new way of life, or even be happy. But we are doing that today, all of us and achieving the impossible. And in the future we will continue to do so. We have dreams and goals today and that is a miracle. Thank you all.