**Commencement Address 2020**

**Albert Einstein High School**

**Kensington, MD**

**Speaker: Will Jawando**

(As prepared for delivery)

Hello Titans Class of 2020!

My name is Will Jawando and I’m an at-large councilmember here in Montgomery County. I represent the more than 1 million people who live in our county. I’m honored to be delivering your commencement address. While I wish I could be there with you all in person, I hope you, your family members and loved ones are staying safe and healthy.

I know this isn’t what you imagined when you pictured your high school graduation. None of us could have guessed that you would be watching me speak from the safety of your home, isolated from your friends and unable to give teachers like Mr. Kavlock, your calming voice of reason from the first day of freshman year, one last high five; or to take one last stroll down Main Street even if it’s no longer Beyonce’s Beyhive.

And I’m not going to tell you that you shouldn’t grieve for what you’ve lost. Your feelings of loss are valid, because you have lost out on some of the most memorable parts of any Senior year in high school.

However, you need to hear that you also have a lot to gain.

That’s right, you have a lot to gain, because this is not the end, this is the beginning. You have overcome adversity no generation before you ever has.  I am proud of each and every one of you for persevering through these trying times, and hope you forever remember the strength and determination it took to reach this milestone, that is something you will be able to draw on in your future.

Once a titan, always a titan. But being a titan is just one piece of who you are and who you will become.

You will carry the lessons and love of the teachers, coaches, staff members -- and most importantly, the parents and family members -- who have guided you over these past years, the friends who supported you and picked you up when you were down, and yes the academic rigor that you had to master to join the ranks of AEHS graduates -- you will carry all that with you as you take your next steps out into the world. But there is still so much for you to do, to experience, to learn. You see, education is a lifelong journey. You have completed one part of it. Life has so much more in store.

Which brings me to the advice part of my remarks. Don’t worry, I’ll keep this part short.

Chances are, you’ve been hearing a lot of advice from the adults around you lately. We all want to tell you what we think we know about what lies ahead for you. Well here’s the thing.

You don’t need us to tell you what to do. You already know that doing the right thing is ultimately the best choice, even if it challenges the status quo or feels different, strange.

That’s my first piece of advice. Trust yourself.

You may have noticed by now that grownups don’t have all the answers. Your generation has already proved itself to have strength of character that far exceeds many so-called grownups – you’ve already taught the generations ahead of you a thing or two.

Speaking out about gun violence and demanding courage from your leaders. Demanding answers for racism, police brutality, and inequality – bringing out into the light the wrongs of our society that have persisted in the shadows for far too long. And taking action to protect our planet. Understanding that it is yours to inherit, which is why you’ve stepped forward now to take care of it.

My second piece of advice is to keep hope alive.

Now, I worked in the Obama White House. So, I’m familiar with all the notions and optimistic desire for hope. But I also know that what President Obama said is true, now more than ever.

“I have always believed that hope is that stubborn thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us, so long as we have the courage to keep reaching, to keep working, to keep fighting,” Obama said the night he was re-elected as president in 2012.

We need hope. Hope literally keeps us alive. Right now, hope can be hard to come by. But for the adults who are watching, we look at your faces and we see hope, we see something better ahead. The world is yours to shape. And we are confident that you are up to the task.

My third, and last piece of advice for today, is to hold onto each other.

Look around you. Your family. Your friends. Your school. Your community. You are not alone. And you never will be. If there’s one thing we’ve all learned from these difficult times, it’s that we are only as strong as those around us. We are only as healthy as those near us. Our neighbor’s struggles are our own.

Stand up for each other. Let go of the things that divide us and embrace the things that unite us. Again, your generation already gets this in ways that the rest of us should emulate.

I grew up in Montgomery County. I’m proud to serve this county as your councilmember. One of the greatest strengths of our community, one that’s reflected in your school and your class, is our diversity.

Our diversity is a strength.

But it comes with a challenge.

When we all come from different cultures, it’s really important we respect and welcome differences -- even when those differences come in ways we don’t anticipate or even understand.

Remember that as you go out into the world. You will meet others who won’t understand you. You will meet those who you don’t understand. Listen to them. Make sure that your voice is heard. And then find common ground.

In the months and years ahead, we’re going to need you to find that common ground and lead us away from the division, the distrust and the devastation of these challenging times and toward hope, opportunity and healing. We’ll be there – your family, your friends, your teachers, your community -- supporting you, guiding you, dusting you off when you fall, but the future is ultimately in your hands.

Congratulations class of 2020. You have so much to be proud of. Keep dreaming big, and do all the good that you can.

The future is yours.