



**2008 Albany High School Graduation
Valedictory by Rachel Rudinger
University at Albany SEFCU Arena
June 29, 2008**

First of all, on behalf of the Class of 2008, I would like to thank all the people who have helped bring us to this day – our families, our friends, our dedicated teachers and staff at Albany High, our principal, superintendent, and the school board. I am sure at this moment, we are all thinking of very special individuals, whether or not they are here with us today.



In 1632, the great scientist, Galileo Galilei looked to the heavens and boldly asserted that our earth, previously thought to be the center of the universe, actually revolved around another body – the sun. For publishing an idea that ran contrary to centuries of church dogma, Galileo faced threats of excommunication and execution.

The 5th-century B.C. Greek philosopher, Socrates, was infamous for his practice of catching people in their logical fallacies, by asking a series of questions. Socrates considered himself a “gadfly” – one who upsets the status quo – and for this, he was forced to drink the poisonous hemlock plant.

French Revolution-era feminist Olympe de Gouges believed women were entitled to the same political rights as men. For publishing her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*, which contained ideas perhaps too ahead of her time, she was arrested and guillotined.

In 1964, civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner traveled to Mississippi to help register African Americans to vote. Months later, their bodies were discovered buried under a dam.

So what did Galileo, Socrates, Olympe de Gauges, and the civil rights workers of Mississippi all have in common, beyond their ultimate fate? Each was, in their own way, ahead of their time. They believed in ideas that were not widely accepted by those of their generation.

Furthermore, they were not afraid to place themselves against the majority, to reject commonplace views, to risk their reputations, even their lives. Today, we readily accept the views of these people; we believe the earth revolves around the sun, that asking questions is good, and that women and African Americans deserve social equality. But where would we be today if it weren't for their confidence to stand up for their beliefs?

My favorite philosopher and mathematician, Bertrand Russell, once said, "Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric." The people mentioned previously are dramatic examples of this principle, but not everyone has to be as brave as Socrates or the Mississippi Three. It is a simple principle which we can all apply to our own lives. Not only should we not fear voicing unusual or unpopular ideas, but we should also be open-minded toward the ideas of others.

So what does all of this have to do with Albany High School? With our graduation?

Albany High is an incredibly diverse school, socially, ethnically, and in almost any other way imaginable. In my four years here, I have found, as I believe most of us have found, that that diversity affords our community a great sense of tolerance, not only of different kinds of people, but of different kinds of ideas. Galileo would have loved the atmosphere of intellectual open-mindedness at Albany High!

I can think of many specific Albany High instances which exemplify both this sort of open-mindedness, and the principle of defending a belief, even when others disagree. Our beloved history teacher Mr. Thomas McGurn has believed for a long time that *any* Albany High student can and ought to complete at least one AP course during their four years here. I am certain that not everyone agreed. But Mr. McGurn stood by this idea, and Albany High has been improved because of it.

This year Mr. Michael Richmond, our extraordinary orchestra conductor, set out to play a full symphony with the orchestra. When others thought it couldn't be done, Mr. Richmond knew it could, and indeed, the Albany High School orchestra's performance of Haydn's "Clock Symphony" was met with standing ovation just two weeks ago.

We all may have our gripes about Albany High, but we are fortunate to have such a place where students, teachers, and staff prove the majority wrong on a regular basis, where there are many people who are not afraid to support ideas they truly believe in, even while others may find them "eccentric," and where an open-minded and tolerant community allows these people to see their ideas and hard work come to fruition.

We, the Class of 2008, must take with us these lessons of tolerance and of confidence in our own ideas, for *no* achievement, great or small, can be made without them.

Thank you and congratulations!