

The Altamont School

Distinguished Alum Speech

I am honored to be here today and am deeply touched by this recognition. One of the messages I hope to convey to you today is the sentiment that is probably best described in the bible passage from Luke 12:48 – “to whom much is given, much is expected.” Working on behalf of Altamont has been a labor of love for me and I have always felt a need to give back to this institution from which I have received so much.

I should start by thanking my family – my wife Sheri (class of 1985), my children William (a 7th grader) and Sara (a 3rd grader at Advent) and Sarah Summerford, my mother-in-law who helps make all of our lives possible. In some cases, the time I give to Altamont is time that is taken away from my family and I have truly been blessed with a supportive family that makes this type of recognition possible. In addition, I would like to thank my parents who made the decision to invest in me by sending me to Altamont. I was also blessed to have the opportunity to attend some terrific schools for undergraduate and graduate education – I owe a tremendous debt to my parents for supporting my overall education.

Having said that – I have a few simple objectives for this message today:

1. I want to share some memories of my time here with you
2. I want to thank many of the faculty not only for their influence in my life but also for their continuing influence on the life and spirit of this school
3. Finally, I hope to be able to share some thoughts on how Altamont can help you, the students, in the future

Before I begin, I should also add that the most important objective for this morning is to attempt (emphasis on the word attempt) to not embarrass my son William. He is not too excited about seeing me here with a microphone in front of all his friends.

So, here are some of my fondest memories of my time at Altamont

- I loved sports and tried to play anything where the coach needed a warm body. I was not an especially gifted athlete but I was willing to work hard and was willing to play a role. In the case of basketball, I played on a JV team that we named “the heartbreak kids” because we absolutely stole 7 or 8 games on last second shots. Later, when I was forced to play varsity because I was just too old to play JV, I became the guy with 5 fouls to give. Sometimes Coach McGowan would send me in to guard one of the better inside players and just tell me – “Cook – don’t let him catch the ball and if he does foul him.” That was an assignment I could handle!
- During my junior year, there was a very smart and popular guy who was running for President of the Student Council. He was also a good friend of mine. As the slate of candidates came together, he was going to run un-opposed and I just thought that was wrong. So, I decided to run and see what I could do. Several of my good friends joined the effort and we had a great time with the campaign. One of my nicknames was Hoss – a not-so-flattering nickname. Hoss was a large and somewhat dimwitted character from the TV show Bonanza. (I know that many of you have never heard of this show.) So, my campaign slogan was “Hoss is Boss” and we plastered that message all over the school. I still have friends today from Altamont who call me by that name. I lost that election by 4 votes but had a great time working on the campaign and hopefully stretched my friend Rob to work a little harder for the job. I did later become Senior Class President which I think resulted from these efforts take on a leadership position.
- Math and science were my favorite subjects and I remember taking classes from Ms. Smallwood who was from Opp, Alabama. She was a great teacher who also had an especially distinct southern accent. We affectionately called her the Oracle of Opp. I still remember her telling me – “Houston, you need to burn a little midnight oil.” I still think of that when I need a little funny inspiration.

Moving to my second topic, there are numerous faculty members who were strong influences on me and some of them are still here.

- I should probably start with Sarah Whiteside. While I can't speak too much personally about Ms. Whiteside from a student perspective, she remains my wife's favorite teacher. Ms. Whiteside has always focused on teaching students how to learn. I remember her saying that if you could train yourself how to find the right facts and learn how to put them together then you can essentially teach yourself anything. I think that the popular term for this today is critical thinking but I always thought of it as more simply as just learning how to learn. Getting a little off subject, I can't fully describe to you how difficult the process of searching for a new Headmaster was when I was President of the Board of Trustees. In equal measure, I can't fully describe how graciously Ms. Whiteside managed the interim Headmaster role as well as the transition to Headmaster. I will always remain thankful for Ms. Whiteside's pleasant demeanor and focused leadership during this time of transition for Altamont.
- I would also like to thank Jimmy Wiygul. I fondly remember Mr. Wiygul giving me an assignment in 11th grade English to write a paper about a career. For some reason that I can't remember, I just could not pick a career to write about. So I asked Mr. Wiygul if I could write about leadership through a study of Napoleon – that is a slightly different topic. However, that was one of my favorite assignments. Thanks to Mr. Wiygul for indulging my idiosyncrasies and being such a good teacher and passionate advocate for Altamont.
- I loved taking French and going to France with Jeanne Classe. Languages were a bit of a challenge for me but Madame Classe always made it interesting and fun. Through French, I learned to take some chances and adapt to different environments by being immersed in a different culture. This skill may be the one I use most today in the business world. As an example, I have had 6 different bosses in the last 2 years which will certainly stretch your ability to adapt. Thank you Madame Classe!
- Margaret Gage, whose picture hangs in the Hames gallery, was also a terrific teacher who I credit with training me how to write a critical paper. When she gave a test, she would walk into the room and write a thesis sentence on the board. The test was to agree or disagree with the thesis and write a paper to support your position. At the

beginning, this was an intimidating process. Over time, I learned to write an opening paragraph, construct an argument in 3-4 paragraphs and then develop a closing paragraph. This process became formulaic over time. When I arrived at college, I was amazed at how many students simply could not write a basic research paper. As a result, I easily made A's in my required English classes at Georgetown when English was my most challenging subjects at Altamont. I cannot overemphasize how this skill helps me in my work today. The process of assembling and supporting a critical argument is a real difference maker in the world.

- Martin Hames is obviously a name that you know. When you describe Mr. Hames, it is hard to know where to start. He was a massive personality who inspired many to be intellectual, creative and honorable. He was committed to “the renaissance idea” which is now part of the way we think of ourselves as members of the Altamont family. For Mr. Hames, the ideal was to develop you mind, spirit and body and he believed in true character and integrity. I still miss Mr. Hames and I thank him for making me see more in myself.
- Carolyn Lynch was the music and choir teacher and I thank her for finding a little musical talent in me. I sang in the choir from 5th grade through 12th grade and participated in many of the musical productions. Learning to get on stage and perform has also yielded important benefits for me. I now make numerous presentations and this training helped me to be comfortable in front of an audience. Ms. Lynch was a caring and joyful person and her passion for the job inspired me any many others during her tenure here.
- And for the all of the faculty that I have not mentioned, I am thankful for the efforts to not only teach me but also to get to know me as a person. This is one of the things that make Altamont truly special. The faculty always made me feel like they were truly interested in helping me to be a better student and perhaps more importantly a better person.

So how will Altamont help you – my third topic.

- You will be very well prepared for college. I was pretty intimidated when I arrived at Georgetown and I was able to do well with a modest effort especially during my freshman year. This success made it much easier to maintain and ultimately helped me get a job in New York and continue on to Harvard Business School. There is a lot to be said about getting off to a good start.
- As I mentioned before, you will leave here with the ability to reason and write well. This skill will serve you for the rest of your life. I literally use this training every day.
- Perhaps most importantly, you will learn how to learn. As you may have noticed, I have been in multiple career tracks from Investment Banking to Grocery Stores to Advertising Agencies to Retail Banking. I think there is a tendency to over-think your initial career direction. Don't get too caught up in these early career decisions. As long as you learn how to learn, you can reinvent yourself and take on new directions.
- I hope that you will also develop some real long-lasting friendships. I was recently in Washington, DC and I had dinner with a classmate who I have literally have seen twice in 25+ years. We were able to reconnect immediately and had a great time catching up. Altamont helps make these kinds of close connections possible not only with your friends but also with your teachers.

I started by talking about the phrase – “To whom much is given, much is expected.” I hope that you see that you have already been given a gift by being here. I also hope that you will feel as I do – that you will want to give back when you have the opportunity.

Thank you again to the faculty, students and administration for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. I have been truly blessed in my life and I remain thankful to Altamont for helping to make me a better person. This award is truly an honor for me. Thank you!