

Good Afternoon, first thing I would like to do is thank Superintendent Michael Bergeron, Mayor Arthur Vigeant, Principle Riley, and Mrs. Belisle for approaching me with the opportunity to speak here today. I want to congratulate the Class of 2019 for completing such a huge chapter of your lives and opening yourselves up to the next stage. Each and everyone of you has so much potential to do amazing things, and I am looking forward to seeing what extraordinary accomplishments each one of you make. It is an honor to be speaking in front of you today on such a memorable occasion. On top of all that, I would like to give you my gratitude and thanks every one of you today, as well as the Marlborough community. For those of you that don't know me, my name is Connor Walker, and I sat in these exact chairs two years ago, bright eyed and buzzing with excitement of a new journey in life, sad to leave my close friends and shared memories made throughout the years, but ecstatic at the opportunity to make new memories and meet new people from all over the country. I had everything planned out, or so I thought.

I was to attend Saint Anselm College and fulfill my dream of playing college football, while learning about Marketing, my intended major and the subject that I've always been interested in. In all honesty, I thought I had life made. I was on top of the world and thought nothing could touch me or take away all the hard work I put into making my dreams a reality. After a little adjustment period and a couple of calls home, I settled into my environment and had a successful freshman year, both academically and in athletics. With all of that behind me, I continued to put in the work during the months I had off, until my sophomore year arrived. Now knowing what football camp and academics were like in a college setting, the butterflies and the nervous feeling in my stomach was replaced with eagerness to start again. After already having success, I honestly thought I was set for the next four years. I had made amazing friends, created memories that will last forever, and had started to venture into things I never gave a thought to in high school. There was nothing I was afraid of except for finals and running out of meal money, which sounds hard to do but isn't impossible as I learned the hard way.

That was until the day that changed my life forever came. September 29th, 2018. Things seemed ironically simple that morning. A bus ride from Manchester New Hampshire to New Haven Connecticut followed by a

football game. A day I've lived repeatedly, but a day that brought a hit that I would surely never forget. In the third quarter of that game, the last quarter of football it turns out I would ever play, an awkward hit to the head left me paralyzed neck down, unable to feel or move any of my limbs due to a spinal cord injury. I laid motionless on the ground, was stretchered out and taken in an ambulance to New Haven hospital. I was so concussed I couldn't think until I lay helpless in the face of 8 doctors trying to piece together what had just happened to me.

The first thing I could think of was why, why did this happen to me? Football, the thing that has been a piece of my life until I can remember, gone. Questions started to flood my head, how would I go to school, how would I get a job, how would I walk across the aisle at my own wedding? And most importantly, why did my family now have to face this. I was unable to pick up a remote, feed myself, was unable to even think about going the bathroom or getting dressed on my own. Things that two years ago I took for granted as everyday activities, stripped from me in seconds. My life and my family's life was in shambles, and I didn't know how to deal with any of it. Turns out I didn't need to on my own, as the community gave me a new sense of confidence and pride like I have never experienced before. As soon as I got my phone in the rehab hospital, there was nothing but an outpour of love and support from the people of Marlborough. Posters filled my room, signed by my former teammates, classmates and friends. Grades years below my own were making signs and giving words of encouragement. Youth football teams were making videos and giving their own signs of support. There was even a whole game dedicated to my cause, and to this day, it brings a tear to my eye. Even though I was in the scariest phase of my life with no way to tell how long I was to be in there or if I would ever walk again, I wasn't scared because I wasn't alone. I had thousands of people behind me ready to help me in any way they can. It confirmed to me what I already knew, no matter how far I may go, Marlborough will always be my home.

I cannot express how much this meant to me, especially mentally, and cannot thank this community enough. Upon entering the hospital their timetable for recovery was unknown but expected to be long. With the boost from everyone of you, I had a new perspective on everything, You gave me the courage to wake up in the morning and face the challenge of

that day head on, and within 6 weeks I walked out of Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital grinning ear to ear.

Class of 2019, every single one of you have an amazing opportunity ahead of you. Whether it be entering the work force, going to school, joining the military it doesn't matter, because at the end of the day, there's no easy way to figure out what the "right thing" is to do for your future, that is something everyone figures out on their own in their own time. While I still haven't figured it out myself yet, I have learned a couple things long the way. The most important being simply that life isn't fair. If you look around you here today, no one has the perfect life, everything is dealing with something, whether they show it or not. Life will take things away that you thought you'd never lose, I had to learn that in the worst way possible. But no matter how bad things get, how hard life knocks you down, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel, and it's more about how fast you get back on your feet, dust yourself off and continue on with whatever it is you are doing. They say it takes a village to raise a child, and in my 20 years, I've come to realize how true this statement really is. No matter what the situation is, if you lean on your loved ones and the people closest to you, you will be able to get through even the toughest hits. I found my village here, with all of you and the community, and can't begin to explain how thankful I am for that. Class of 2019, you've made it. Congratulations, and thank you for allowing me this amazing opportunity.