Today we celebrate the past we share as a community, as well as the continued development and growth of our school. Though many of us come to Reunion looking for familiar faces, I hope we all leave having shared conversations, memories, and stories with fellow alumni who may have been strangers before tonight.

I’d like to acknowledge a few of the specific class years that we are honoring this evening and maybe share some interesting moments from those years:

First and foremost to the alumni who have joined us from the second graduating class of Elisabeth Irwin High School, the class of 1946. Congratulations on your 70th Reunion! My dad, Alan Gargle was a member of this class and is here today. He remembers learning critical thinking skills and the ability to work as a team from his experience with progressive learning at El. He credits the school with launching his interest in radio and broadcasting when the class of ’46 went to a radio station, W75NY, to learn about radio production with the staff there. They wrote radio plays, which were the rage at that time and they turned them into stage plays as well. In turn, I have him to thank for my own career in television news and an addiction to the adrenaline rush of living history. My own unofficial start in the news industry was when I was the editor of the “Chinese Daily News” when we did a unit on Chinatown in Amy’s 7’s class at Little Red. Welcome back to 4 members of the distinguished class of 1946. I hope you share my dad’s and my fond memories and I’m sure that you have passed on these same values of a lifelong love of learning to your own children and grandchildren. You represent the beginning of this great institution and it means so much that you are here.

To the class of 1956 who graduated 60 years ago- congratulations. There are ____ of you here today. We are especially indebted to your classmate Adria Price, who is an active member of our alumni council and continues to give back to the school. She has amused us with her memories that back in the ‘50s there were 6 girls on the basketball team and that they were only allowed to play half court. A lot has changed since then!

To the class of 1966 that is celebrating its 50th reunion... There are almost 20 of you here tonight to celebrate your milestone and also honor your classmate, Jim. While planning his wonderful discussion today, Jim recently said that
diversity in foreign service is as much about diversity of thought as anything else. This drive to seek-out different minds, to work together to create change, is deeply rooted in the culture of our school. Our mission statement now instructs that our students learn to be “active participants in our democratic society, with the creativity, integrity, and courage to bring meaningful change to the world.” Jim is a member of your class who has clearly done that.

On Thursday we hosted an 85th birthday lunch for the class of 1949 who shared memories, sang songs from their class songbook, and recited poetry that they remember learning while at LREI. Victor Berman, shared a poem he wrote about the current presidential election, inspired by Lewis Carroll’s “The Jabberwocky.”

This weekend we also welcomed back our young alumni. The class of 2006 came back and was greeted by Micah who, before becoming high school principal, was an influential teacher for the class of 2006. It wasn’t long before they were playing piano and singing in the PAC, just like they did during almost every lunch as students. Though 57 years apart, it seems that the classes of 1949 and 2006 are similar in this way. It is wonderful to see how quickly our returning alumni feel at home.

At the Current and Former Faculty cocktail party yesterday, we heard how so many of LREI teachers and fellow alumni have helped LREI students discover lifelong curiosities. Celi Khanyile-Lynch, class of 2009, says that her 11th grade Gotham class sparked her passion for New York City politics and history. She is currently working in Mayor de Blasio’s office. Celi is here tonight to present our Honorary Alumnus award.
We are all gathered here today to celebrate milestones- 5 year, 10 year, 30 year, 50 year, 70 year! Anniversaries- but we also should recognize that there is a common thread that binds all of us together and that is the values and principles and the lifelong love of learning that an LREI education grants us.

That common thread guides the inspiration for the Alumni Council’s selection of a Distinguished Alumnus who has carried the principles of their LREI education to the world outside the doors of Bleecker and Charlton Streets.

Today I have the honor of introducing you to a man that overcame great adversity as a young man growing up in segregated South Carolina to rise to the highest levels of our foreign service. Elizabeth Irwin High school became an important step on this journey for Ambassador James Gadsden.

Jim came to the school in 1964 as part of an exchange program that was run by a Quaker organization. It helped place promising students who were held back by segregation practices in the south in better integrated schools in the north. In Charleston Jim had been frustrated by his own black teachers who he felt did not “encourage black students to go beyond the roles that were defined for them by white society.” He described it to me as a “stone ceiling” that “continued to push others down.”

When Jim arrived at El it opened up possibilities that he had never imagined for himself- he thrived in French language classes, learned how to write and developed speech techniques in his drama classes with Mary VanDyke. His skills as an independent thinker took flight and his advisor encouraged him to attend Harvard.

In college Jim majored in economics and took courses in politics and he went on to receive a masters in Chinese Studies at Stanford. He joined the foreign service in 1972 just a few months after President Nixon’s trip to China. At the state department he served in many roles in countries including Taiwan, Hungary, at
the Mission to the European Community in Brussels, also as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs. In 2002 he was nominated by President George W. Bush to become Ambassador to Iceland where he served until 2005.

Jim still attributes some of his success at the state department to his Elizabeth Irwin education... His El French was strong enough to allow him to pass a rigorous language exam that got him the job in Brussels, despite a racist recruiter who was reluctant to give a black man a premiere spot in a premiere mission.

When I spoke to Jim this week he described the influences from El as some of the most powerful in his success because they “regeared my horizons... It was profoundly significant in that I am always looking beyond whatever horizon is in front of me.”

Please join me in congratulating Ambassador James Gadsden as the recipient of the 2016 Distinguished Alumnus award.