Good morning, Middle School Community.

Thank you for allowing me to be with you and share some thoughts this morning.

When considering the message I wanted to bring to you today, I thought about you. Your parents, greater family members, peers, teachers, coaches and others, including the people you will never meet who are celebrities, media icons and complete strangers. These folks hold influence in your lives.

I hope that their impact is positive. I remember Middle School quite well. I remember TV shows being on certain nights and taping shows I wanted to see. I remember gathering
with neighbors to play on a local Atari or intellivision sets — an old school Xbox. I remember riding in the back seat of our family sedan without a seatbelt. I remember banana milkshakes at Burger King, the advent of Smoothie King to my hometown, New Orleans, Madonna, the Middle School dress code at my school, which would not let us wear oversized shirts over leggings, unless belted (really!), waiting for my sisters to be ready for school, deciding walking four blocks was a better option, even in the rain, going to a Madonna concert, yes, more Madonna, pimples, worrying about who would let me sit at their table, who to let sit at our table, worrying about making the soccer team, being asthmatic and trying to run with the pack, trying to manage an increasingly difficult academic load and being embarrassed by my family members when we’d go out for dinner. I also remember the caring teachers and friends who helped me with all of these times.

Self-conscious and curious are words that come to mind when I think about Middle School.

At the start of the year, I encouraged you all to put more time into making the community better and less about what others thought of you. How is that going for you? When I think back to my Middle School years, I can't help but think of my paternal grandfather, Isidore Maas Bach. He was born in 1896 in Houma, Louisiana. He had many brothers and sisters, most of whom passed away from yellow fever. He was an old man when I was born in 1972. Yes that makes me turning 48 this summer. Baba, as I called him, was 76 when I was born. He could stand on his head, walked five or so miles a day, spoke seven or eight languages and never went to college. Baba was an entrepreneur before that was a word. He owned a moss factory. The stuff that hangs off of trees in the deep south was used to stuff mattresses, car seats and furniture, to form rope, to plaster houses and more. Baba traded furs with the Ojibwe indians. He would travel to Canada and spoke their dialect with ease. Baba would play school with us as small children and agree to be the naughty child, wear a “dunce” cap and be sent to the principal's office. Baba played restaurant with us. He would order, cook and help us clean the props. I remember the smell, taste and sight of his famous mish mosh — fried eggs, yellow grits and bacon mashed together in a delicious concoction. He was a master gardener who patiently grew roses, nurtured magnolia blossoms and cared for the earth. Baba was in many ways an evolved gentleman who was patient and careful.

He and his wife, my grandmother, were opposites. She was a steel magnolia, from Beaumont, Texas, she received her master's in mathematics from Columbia University, a rare occasion for a woman of her era. She was firm and knew the currency of time would fade rapidly. I remember the click of her long and pearly pink nails as she tapped
them waiting for Isi, as she called her husband, my Baba, to hurry up from just down the hallway. When in Middle School, I could walk to their front door during fire drills at my school. They lived a half block from our school. However, I would rarely do so. You see, Baba was to me old and, well, dated. I didn't want Baba at my Middle School lunch table. What I didn’t realize is that he was so cool. Baba did not work during my lifetime. I did not understand his holding of doors as a way of life. We’d be sitting in the restaurant, or trying to get the best seat in the theater and there he was, holding the door for others.

During World War II, he worked diligently and secretly to ensure the safe arrival to the United States for Jewish immigrants. He wanted to ensure education, life, food and shelter for those being persecuted during Hitler's regime. He found a way to get families here and held the door open for them to have a better life. Baba sold a restaurant and instead of not worrying about where the chefs, waiters and others would gain employment, he walked down the streets in the French Quarter and ensured that his team had jobs at the neighboring restaurants. He opened and held the door for others to maintain and gain jobs.

Baba would step aside on the street car and let mothers with babies, those coming from long days of work on their feet and tourists sit on the bench seats. He would stand and grab a leather handle from the ceiling. He would step aside and hold the door for others to depart the trolleys as well. I was pretty sure we’d miss our stop, be late and that the streetcar engineers would leave him on the steps; however, Baba was determined to hold the door for others.

In many ways, this is who he was and what he did. Baba held the door. I think back to the past and the many times Baba would tell us about his youth and early years and all that I did not listen to or retain. Yes, I wish I knew more; however, I see him, clear as can be, holding the door for others as they enter new spaces. He would say things that were funny and so true.

In restaurants when a waiter would come near to clear his setting you could hear his Cajuny voice say, “Son, the good lord took nine months to make me and I am in no rush to finish this plate of nourishment that someone took time to make for me.”

When the house phone would ring during dinner, he would stand, shuffle to the phone on the wall and say, “ Ma'am, this is a sacred time in our day. We gather as a family and if you can’t properly pronounce my last name as Bach, you certainly have no business calling me during this dinner hour.” When answering the door, he would peek through
the looking glass and say, “We don’t want any today!” He always did this when he saw his giggling grandchildren, no matter our age. If we were trying, making mistakes and staying the course of learning, he would encourage us with a, “Now you’re cooking with gas!”

Yes, Baba held the door and taught me how to do so for others. I encourage you to learn from Baba, to be a door holder and give others the opportunities that we may take for granted. Be a connector for others and help them feel welcomed in shared spaces.

When I think back to Middle School, I wish I’d opened more doors for others. However, I am in many ways as Head of School a door opener and, as such, I hope that this talk today has created space for you to reflect on the lessons your family members have to share with you the ways you can slow down and grow the good for others and the unique time this is in your life to improve situations rather than judge others. In Lower School, you learned a lot about taking care of yourself and appreciating the differences and commonalities in your community members. In Middle School, we learn more about how to take care of those in our community and beyond. Soon, in Upper School, you will focus more on the greater world. Collegiate is a big community that takes care of itself, each other and the wider world. It is my hope and my belief that we can continue to build upon Helen Baker, our founder’s vision for being good citizens in the widest sense.

Today, Collegiate’s mission calls us to be a diverse and inclusive community of learners. As such, I hope my stroll down memory lane with my paternal grandfather, Baba, helped inspire you to open the door for each other and lead from within.

Thank you.