

Elsa M. Núñez
Windham High School Graduation
Keynote Address
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I would like to thank Principal Briaies for inviting me to be with you today — it is a privilege! I also want to thank Lynne Ide, chair of the Board of Education, her colleagues on the board, and superintendent Garcia, for their dedication to the children of Willimantic. Education is the hope for the future of all Americans, and I thank our local educational leaders for all that they are doing to bring hope and opportunity to Windham students.

I want to congratulate today's graduates — you have not only made your families proud and accomplished something special, no one can ever take your diploma from you. No one can erase the knowledge you are gained. You have earned today's celebration of your success. Well done! **(APPLAUSE)**

As much as you have done on your own, you would not be here today without the support of your parents and other supporters. Will the parents, families and friends of today's graduates — the people who have offered unconditional love and support — please stand up! Graduates, Help me say “thank you” to all those who have helped you successfully reach this impressive achievement today! **(APPLAUSE)**

The faculty and staff at Windham High School have also given their time and support to help you earn your high school diploma; will they please stand up! **(APPLAUSE)**

I was asked to offer today's graduates some words of encouragement, words of inspiration. I want to share three key ideas with you today.

First, **“where you start is not where you end up.”** In this country, you can truly do anything you work hard to achieve. Oprah Winfrey is worth \$3 billion today, but at one time she was using empty flour sacks for dresses.

JK Rowling — the author of the Harry Potter books — was a starving single mother on welfare before she achieved success. And Leonardo Dicaprio’s childhood was an endless struggle for survival — his father sold comic books on the street to make a living. So it’s not where you start, it is where you end up that counts—and it is up to you to imagine how to get there.

That is my second message to you today—**dream big and dream often!** I am not talking about dreaming during sleep. I am talking about picturing yourself in a future that includes opportunities and situations you can barely imagine for yourself today. Human beings have been dreaming about flying for hundreds of thousands of years—and in 1903, the Wright Brothers made that dream come true. People have stared at the moon for thousands of years as well, imagining themselves up there, and in 1969 — not even 50 years ago — men walked on the moon for the first time.

I suspect LeBron James dreamt of being the best basketball player in the world — and now he is. The word they use to describe dreaming yourself in the future is “visualization” where you actually see yourself in a role or position you desire. What do you want to be the best in the world at? Visualize it!

The third message I have for you is this. As you lift yourself up, as you visualize yourself doing amazing things, **think about doing something that will help others.** Most of the good work in this world is done to benefit other people, and most of the time, this work is done in teams, not by individuals.

Let me share two stories about how people can work together to benefit others. The first story is about geese!

Many years ago I read a set of facts about geese and the lessons people could learn from them. It seems silly, but those of you who are animal lovers know that we can learn a great deal from non-humans.

These were written in an Outward Bound Newsletter. I would like to share these with you today because I have used them throughout my life. I often stop what I am doing and reread them to remind myself of their wisdom.

FACT 1 As each goose flaps its wings it creates an “uplift” for the birds that follow. By flying in a “V” formation, the whole flock adds 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

LESSON 1 People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.

FACT 2 When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone. It quickly moves back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front of it.

LESSON 2 If we have as much sense as a goose we stay in formation with those headed where we want to go. We should be willing to accept their help and give our help to others.

FACT 3 When the lead goose tires, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies to the point position.

LESSON 3 It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing leadership. As with geese, people are interdependent on each other's skills, capabilities and unique arrangements of gifts, talents or resources.

FACT 4 The geese flying in formation honk to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

LESSON 4 We need to make sure our honking is encouraging. In groups where there is encouragement, production is much greater. The power of encouragement (to stand by one's core values and encourage the core values of others) is the quality of honking we seek.

FACT 5 When a goose gets sick, wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again. Then, they launch out with another formation or catch up with the flock.

LESSON 5 If we have as much sense as geese, we will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we are strong.

Yes, one person can make an enormous difference and help others stand together in difficult times. I would like to tell you about a woman who demonstrated what one person can do when he or she feels moved to try to help others. The lessons from the geese served her well.

Hanley Denning was a 22-year-old woman from Maine who had just graduated from college in 1997. She visited Guatemala while on vacation, and came upon a situation that she simply could not walk away from.

More than 6,000 people were living in or near the 35-acre city dump in Guatemala City, rummaging daily through the rubble and decay to find items they might use or sell. The methane gas was so bad it turned children's hair red-orange. Dogs and gangs patrolled the alleyways.

For the next eight years, Denning worked tirelessly to bring hope and sustenance to the people of the dump. She became known as “El angel del Basurero” — the “angel of the dump.” She created an organization called Safe Passage and together with other organizations she was able to bring health services, education, and other support to the people she had given her life to. She established a school in an abandoned church — it now serves 500 children. Residential homes have been built on the edges of the dump, and the number of people living in squalor is down to 1,500.

Hanley Demming died in 2007 on a car accident, but Safe Passage lives on. It is an amazing legacy of an amazing woman. Like the geese, she worked in a common direction with a community who needed her desperately; like the geese she helped them and accepted their help as they built a team.

Like the geese, she organized the group according to the skills they had (many of which she did not have); like the geese, they encouraged each other day after day even when the goal looked impossible – they honked; and like the geese they stood by each other as they turned around the living conditions for thousands of people. She applied the lessons of the geese, and it worked amazingly well.

Yes. One person can make all the difference. So how does Hanley's story and the lessons I learned from the geese apply to you?

In addition to finding a good job and supporting yourself and your family, you have a responsibility to help others. There is a cause out there with your name on it, whether it's helping out at your local elementary school, volunteering on a Habitat for Humanity project, or cleaning up your town's landfill. You will find the way to make a personal contribution.

As you go out into the workforce and forge your own way, find new ways to serve your local community, be it as a Little League coach, a member of the school board, or serving food at a homeless shelter. If you go into business, strive to become a great leader and manager who stays connected to your community. If you go into healthcare, I challenge you to provide the best care you can to your patients.

If you go into education, work to inspire your students. If you go into technology, create ideas that provide useful and valuable innovations.

Whatever you do and wherever you go in life, give it your all and always remember the lesson from the geese that will empower you to succeed because you will see the good in working as a team with others to achieve your dreams and affect change for the good of others.

You are at a crossroads now . . . at the end of your time at Windham High School, ready to begin a new chapter in our lives. Seize the moment. Stand tall . . . but stay humble. And stretch yourself to your limits, because it is when we dream of great things, when we attempt new things, even difficult things, that we grow the most. Si Se Puede — yes you can!