

I have always thought that people are like houses in that if the foundation is weak or fractured, nothing with meaning can exist. Thus, I am thankful that before I knew what I wanted to do in life, before I knew who I wanted to be, JCDS provided me the tools, the moral compass and the values I needed to decipher right from wrong and understand that it remains my obligation to leave this world a better place than I found it. As I prepare myself for the next chapter in my life, away from home and the people who raised me, I know that I will be faced with challenges and choices, decisions and trials; yet, as I look to the future and think about what I hope to become, I have also reflected on the past and feel immense gratitude for the teachers and mentors at JCDS, whose influences make up the mosaic of ideas, values, beliefs and philosophies of the person I am today.

One of my earliest memories is of a lesson I learned from the lunch dates we used to do in Junior Kindergarten. Each day, a select person would choose another person to eat lunch with. I remember choosing one boy, but when lunch time came, asking my teacher if I could choose someone else because I had played with the other boy during recess and wanted to eat with him. My teacher told me I could not switch. When I protested and got upset, I remember her saying, “We shouldn’t be exclusive. Imagine what it would feel like if someone else wanted to switch another classmate for you.” It would be over a decade before I learned the name of the value my teacher had just taught me. Whether we knew it or not as students, empathy runs through the foundations of JCDS and its teachings. Whether it was through the posters on the wall that asked us to imagine ourselves in the other persons’ shoes or through lessons on the Golden Rule, JCDS taught me to think before I act and consider the way by which I affect other people. Even our Thursday Folders taught us lessons on character, with each month having been assigned a moral

our teacher intended for us to learn. In short, JCDS sits on a foundation of empathy and character; while many institutions have academic faculties on par with it, JCDS truly excels not only in creating smart people, but foundationally good people as well. In fact, I would accredit JCDS and the character training I received there with instilling within me the wish to create a nonprofit during my years in high school. JCDS taught me to always strive to better my community, so I worked to create an organization to do my best to help as many people as I possibly could. JCDS taught me that no person is without value, so I structured my nonprofit so that anybody who wanted to help could join us. JCDS taught me that diversity should not be viewed as an enemy of success and cohesion, but as a means by which fresh perspectives and true unity can usher in positive change to our community.

Yet, while JCDS provided me with a strong foundation of character, I also have come to recognize the thirst for knowledge and academic ability it has formulated within me. JCDS did not just teach me to memorize facts on a piece of paper or regurgitate verbatim from a textbook. My school not only taught me the power of knowledge and gave me a vibrant curiosity, but further showed me to look at the world through the eyes of my own perspective. I remember in Third Grade we played a game in the library where Ms. Kusiak would ask us a question and we would have to Google the answer. I recall my group finding the answer to the first question, copying it down and reading it out to her word for word. I remember her saying, “That’s the correct answer, but you didn’t get it right. A parrot can repeat back to me what someone else says. I want you to find the answer, but in your own words. That’s how I’ll know you’ve learned something.” That lesson has remained imperative throughout my school experiences. JCDS taught me not to be a parrot, mindlessly repeating the words of others, but to think for myself; to ponder and question and interpret the world around me through an unfiltered lens. Because of

JCDS, I know the difference between information and knowledge; JCDS not only taught me what to learn, but how to learn as well.

JCDS is the foundation upon which my character and academic experiences are built. I am sincerely grateful for the person JCDS has shaped me to be.