



# Graduation 2008

**Commencement Address: Caitlin Baggott '95,  
Director, PolitiCorps ([www.politicorps.org](http://www.politicorps.org))**

Thank you, Class of 2008, for inviting me to join you on this beautiful day. I can't tell you how enormously flattered I was to be asked, and how glad I am to be here. I have always thought that Putney was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me, and I hope when you return here through the years, you feel as I did wending my way up past the orchards—that I was returning home . . . .

I was glad to see that your play this spring was called *Anything Goes*, because in a meaningful way, that “anything goes” mentality is one of the things I admire most about this place. We're lucky, each of us, to have our time here, in this most unusual community where you can be and become whomever you want. Putney believes in its students. The greatest gift that Putney gives its alumni is the confidence and grace to go forward in the world with self-assurance.

We know what to do and we know how to do it. We aren't paralyzed by a need to seek permission or approval; we aren't constantly searching for acceptance, because we've already given it to ourselves and to each other. And that's no small thing. Many people never overcome this obstacle.

I studied anthropology in college and one anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss wrote about his travels throughout the world, in which he met and got to know Alaskan Inuits, hunter gatherers in the rainforests of Brazil, nomads in Mongolia, and, of course, his colleagues in France. He wrote about how remarkable it is that the human animal is so adaptable—that we are each born capable of becoming any of a million things, living a million different kinds of lives, and we end up living just one. But Putney always seemed to me like a place where you could try on different ways of being. You test out your

styles and ideas, take risks, be bold, sing loudly and possibly off-key, while doing pot wash. So, I enjoy coming back.

Ever the teacher, Emily provided me with simple and clear instructions for success this morning. “They want someone young and not too depressing,” she said. I figure I can get at least half of that right just by showing up. One my teachers hugged me in the KDU yesterday and said “You haven't aged a day!” and I thought . . . “Well, I haven't really been gone that long.”

I departed this campus 13 years ago with no particular path in mind. I felt comfortable with the idea that I still had four years to find one, most likely from an armchair in the reading wing of my college library. But I hadn't spent many months at college before a friend told me that our campus was close to an elementary school where most of the students lived in poverty, and 30 percent weren't able to read in 3rd grade. She asked if I wanted to be a tutor, and I began to do that work.

I volunteered throughout my years at college, first in public schools, and then in a local prison—teaching the things I knew, reading and writing poetry and binding books. After I graduated I wanted to hike in the wilderness and wake up in a sleeping bag, so I took my volunteer resumé to a program in Utah that hired me to bring incarcerated youth into the



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**IS DIRECTOR OF POLITICORPS, A POLITICAL ACTIVISM ORGANIZATION WITH THE STATED MISSION OF “IGNITING LEADERS FOR THE POLITICS OF TOMORROW.” LEARN MORE AT [WWW.POLITICORPS.ORG](http://WWW.POLITICORPS.ORG).**

<opposite page> **ASSISTANT FARM MANAGER AND WHITE COTTAGE DORMHEAD MARGIE LEVINE DRIVES MEMBERS OF THE CLASS OF 2008 TO COMMENCEMENT IN THE “FARM LIMOUSINE.” IRREVERENT? UNDIGNIFIED? A STAB AT ICONOCLASM? NO, IT'S AN HONOR TO RIDE THE HAY WAGON WHEN YOUR GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS INCLUDE WORKING ON THE FARM.**

## College List for the Class of 2008

American University of Paris  
Bard College  
Barnard College  
Beloit College  
Bennington College (3)  
Columbia University  
Concordia University  
Drew University  
Earlham College  
Fordham University  
Gustavus Adolphus College  
Hampshire College  
Hendrix College  
Humboldt State University  
Keene State College  
Knox College  
Maine College of Art  
Marlboro College (3)  
McDaniel College  
Moorpark College  
Mount Holyoke College  
New York University (3)  
Northeastern University  
Pennsylvania State University  
Prescott College  
Reed College  
Rhode Island School of Design (2)  
Rutgers  
Savannah College of Art and Design  
Smith College (6)  
St. Olaf College  
Trinity College  
Tufts University  
Unity College  
University of Chicago  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (3)  
University of Notre Dame  
University of Toronto  
University of Vermont  
Williams College  
Wellesley College

desert for two months at a time to teach them self-reliance, confidence, and consequences. Nothing teaches consequences like Mother Nature, right?

When I left the desert I returned to Oregon, and spent a couple of years working in homeless shelters, teaching, and counseling kids who had run away or were living on the streets.

In all of this work over seven years, I got to know the kids I worked with well. I spent months at a time talking with and teaching five or six or 12 kids, learning their stories, witnessing their struggles, encouraging their dreams. I've heard some teachers say that it's hard work, but it's all worth it for that one great student. But I thought, instead—and I think this is a particularly Putney way of seeing the world—that it was all worth it because of all of the students, the good and the bad, the successes, and more often, the kids who were in the middle of a long hard struggle, and with whom I had the privilege to share a few safe minutes.

But after seven years of working in the trenches I felt hugely overwhelmed. It was like I was trying to move a mountain by chipping away at one gritty cornice.

In America today, about a third of young people volunteer—but only six percent will volunteer in any political capacity, for a politician or to pass a ballot measure, or to lobby for an issue. Only slightly more than that number—about 10 percent—have any contact with an elected official. Far, far fewer run for office themselves. People will volunteer to clean a beach, or serve lunch at a homeless shelter, but not to elect a legislator who will work to enact tougher regulations on carbon emissions, or will fight for the weakest and poorest among us.

After seven years of working in the trenches, I couldn't name our state's senators or tell you with whom to speak to change the tough mandatory sentencing laws for juvenile crimes that were putting so many young people in our state behind bars and diverting hundreds

of millions of dollars away from schools and into prisons. That was six years ago, at a time when our government had decided to tell us that the world has an "axis of evil" and to wage war on one of the poorest countries in the world, Afghanistan. Like many young people around the country at that time, I took a step back from the path I was on and decided to take a different route.

I quit my job and joined a group of friends to start an organization that would get young people to do what young people had done historically—but weren't doing in our generation: to be the Knights of the Round Table, the Freedom Riders. Because in the past, we know, young people have fought for movement-worthy issues. They fought kings, slavery, racism and unjust wars. And our generation has some movement-worthy issues to fight for.

Our economy is tanking, polar ice caps are disappearing, genocide and civil wars tear societies apart across the globe, and, in the United States, acute poverty, injustice, and homelessness shame us from coast to coast. We fail to fund public education, health care, or social security and George Bush seems glib about mortgaging your futures to pay for a war for oil in Iraq. While other nations move forward toward justice and equality for all, the United States remains one of three nations to use the death penalty, is blind to the horrors of land mines, has engaged in a national chat about "acceptable" torture practices, turns away from marriage equity for gay couples, and is building an actual wall across our southern border.

So, I have spent the last six years working with volunteers and activists, high school students, college students, political candidates and other people who care about our city, our state, and our country. We got a bus, and painted it, and load it up with volunteers who travel around the state and talk to people about politics. It's not as crazy as it sounds, and it works. We call ourselves the Bus Project.



**THE CLASS OF 2008,  
OBVIOUSLY HAPPY TO  
HAVE SHIFTED STATUS  
FROM STUDENTS  
TO ALUMNI.**

In 2002, when the organization started, our legislature was so regressive that a critical bill about affordable housing in Portland couldn't even get a hearing. We spent the last six years organizing thousands of volunteers to educate voters about issues and candidates and, after three elections, our legislature met last year and passed a lot of good bills: a ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation; better funding for schools; 17-year-olds can register to vote. It's a start.

We are living in interesting times. And we have a chance to do something amazing; historic. And I use the word chance on purpose. Because none of us has to do this. There will be no citizenship demerits if you fail to act. If only six percent of young people today volunteer politically, that means that many others don't—and very little harm comes to them. But this is our chance, and it is before us. And I'll go one step further—we know what to do with this chance, and we know how to do it. You know what to do, and you know how to do it.

Let me tell you a short story. We had our first child last year, our daughter Augusta, and this spring she and I spent an afternoon at the social security office to take care of

paper work. An old man was there, a veteran, and he had a hole in his trachea and one of those instruments that allowed him to talk by holding it up to his neck—he sounded like a robot. He came over to sit with me and little Augusta, and we got to talking. He had fought in Korea. He was a musician. His wife had died that year.

He asked me if I know why he wore a scarf to cover the hole in his neck?

I looked at him and waited, preparing for the worst. I cringed on the inside.

He smiled and said, “to keep the birds out.”

We talked for about an hour, waiting for our numbers to get called. Mostly, I asked him questions about his service and we exchanged ideas about how veterans get treated after their tours of duty. I'm not sure who he voted for in the last few elections, but I suspect we didn't vote for the same person. And after a while he said, smiling as he said it, “You're pretty smart for someone your age.”

And so I told him something that made him cry. This is what I said:



<above> **DIRECTOR EMILY JONES ENJOYING HER FIRST YEAR OF CONFERRING DIPLOMAS. THIS ONE TO LUCY PHILLIPS. SEE THE REST OF THESE ONE-OF-A-KIND, HAND-MADE KEEPSAKES AT [WWW.PUTNEYSCHOOL.ORG](http://WWW.PUTNEYSCHOOL.ORG).**

<below> **PUTNEY MADRIGALS PERFORMED "IL BIANCO E DOLCE CIGNO" BY JACQUES ARCADELT AND "WALKIN' ON THE GREEN GRASS" BY MICHAEL HENNIGAN.**

"I'm pretty lucky because I spend all my time with high school and college students—and I can tell you now, there's a generation of young people in this country who are going to change the world, and they're younger than I am and a heck of a lot smarter, and they're already out there trying to make the world a better place. They volunteer at twice the rate as my generation, are turning out at the polls at triple and quadruple the rate of any previous year for people their age, they're registering to vote, and they're serious about change. We haven't seen a generation like this since WWII. They're called the millennial generation. They're mostly in middle school, high school, and college now—but they're coming of age. This year, they'll be about a quarter of the electorate. And when the last of them comes of age in seven or eight years, they'll be 36 percent of the electorate, and almost the same size as the Baby Boom generation."

And that made him cry. "Thank you," he said, "you just made my day."

And I think what he meant was that I'd given him some hope.

There's a pretty good dose of hopefulness in the country this year. It seems to be a resonant idea. We have a chance to turn the ship. We know what to do, and we know how to do it.

We can put the brakes on global warming before it's too late. We can make it possible for people who love each other to have marriage equality. We can fund our schools. We can create a health care system that takes better care of citizens than it does of pharmaceutical companies . . . And while some people have turned their hopeful eyes to one candidate or another vying for the highest elected office in our country, a lot of others are turning that look of hope to you.

Because, I'm here to tell you, as someone who was sitting in your seat not long ago, "You know what to do and you know how to do it."

I helped a good friend run for office two years ago—now Representative Ben Cannon. He is about my age, and he was asked by a lot of people he met "Aren't you a little young to be running for office?" So he came up with a few simple things to say in response.



The first was ironic: “I guess I’m too young to know any better.”

Then there was the cheap shot: “Has it been working well to have older folks in charge?”

And finally, his old standby: “If that’s your only problem with me, I’ll grow out of it.”

But really, this was kind of a tricky subject for us. What young people hear when they get involved in politics is that we’re not ready, we aren’t experienced enough, that we don’t know how the world works yet, that we’re too idealistic, that hard knocks will make us more reasonable, more conservative—less hopeful.

We believe this is exactly the wrong approach. Our hunch is that as voters, activists, and candidates, young people possess a set of traits that our country desperately needs now. Young people have a strong sense of justice; they empathize with those who are hurting and in need. Young people are social connectors—forging community bonds across traditional divisions, like race and ethnicity. These days it might happen on Facebook, not bowling leagues, but it’s about connection all the same. Young people champion tolerance and compassion—for example, we’re witnessing a sea change in attitudes about sexual orientation and gender identity. And young people are creative and open-minded.

We need this new approach to politics, this injection of idealism, these new definitions of compassion and tolerance, these new ideas. We need young people to show us the way. And we need to apply those values of empathy, justice, compassion, creativity, and connectivity to our politics when we’re young and surround ourselves with young people when we’re old—because if human experience tells us anything it tells us that these qualities have a tendency to diminish, especially as power and privilege are attained.

You know what to do and you know how to do it. We must awaken each other’s moral imaginations to the real narrative of the twenty-first century, and our roles in it.

And parents, teachers, families, friends, people who are nodding, “Yes, please, you young people fix these things”—I don’t mean to leave you out. The problems we face as a nation and a globe are not the problems of this generation. It’s not about age, it’s about the age. It’s about the era we live in, and the particular opportunities to act it affords.

There’s a story about an old farmer and his pulling horse walking along a road. They come across a man whose car has gotten stuck in the ditch, and the man waves them over. He needs their help to get out of the ditch.

The old farmer hitches his horse to the car, and yells, “Pull Bessie, pull!” And the horse just stands there.

He calls out a second time, “Pull Hector, pull!” Again, the horse does nothing.

A third time the old farmer yells, “Pull, Dasher, pull!” And again, the horse does nothing.

Finally, we whispers to the horse, “Pull, Buddy, pull!” and the horse easily pulls the car from the ditch.

The motorist thanks the old farmer and is about to get into his car and drive away, but he pauses. “I hate to look a gift horse in the mouth, as it were, but why,” he asks, “did you call your horse the wrong name three times?”

“Well, you see,” the farmer says, “Buddy is blind. But he’s no fool. If he thought he had to pull the car out of the ditch by himself he wouldn’t even try.”

So why do I tell this story? I tell this story for the same reason that Emily Jones asked me to come and talk to you today: to let you know that there is a movement of young activists in the country—hundreds and thousands of us—working hard to make change. And none of us would do it if we thought we had to do it alone. Because with this work we have to do, sometimes it’s nice to believe that others are helping too, even if you can’t see them, and sometimes, if they’re not.

You know what needs to be done, and you know how to do it. And you’re not alone.



**WARM WEATHER AND CLEAR SKIES MADE FOR A PLEASANT GRADUATION DAY ON THE EAST LAWN.**