

## Speech by Aribka Desta

*2023 Graduate & AHC College & Career Readiness (CCR) Program Participant*

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When I grew up, I was afraid of growing back down again. My family's financial situation terrified me, and I was convinced that it would hinder any chances of doing what I wanted to do ... being what I wanted to be.

AHC's College and Career Readiness program convinced me of the very opposite. Whenever my finances weighed me down, Gabby was my jetpack. If my inexperience haunted me, Ana and Brenda brought me back to life. Milenka and Laura were always positive figures that had my back, consistently. My mentor, Maureen, spent her free time clearing the road for me to make my own path. There is great importance in having a support system, and everyone here today had a fantastic one. CCR was a collection of life lessons, laughter, and community for me! I can say without a doubt that everyone has made at least one friend and one amazing memory here. For me, it was my college acceptance, something that we all worked on together.

AHC has been a blanket, home, and lifeline for me. I grew up on AHC property and grew up with an AHC community. AHC has carried from community center movie nights in elementary school, to a full-ride scholarship to Stanford University. For the past two years, I've been volunteering with AHC and watching future generations benefit from this beautiful organization the same way I have. When I mentor and tutor with the after-school program elementary students, it seems they have been teaching me one strong lesson right back - that AHC and community are intertwined.

Everyone in this room has the intelligence, capability, and or resources to be who they want to be. We have all done and grown so much together - as students, people, future leaders, fliers, and soarers. Now, as we walk away from the lives we knew - once

stumbling baby giraffes, now tall and proud - I hope everyone here remembers that they will always have that skill with them. There is a world out there patiently waiting for you - and you have so much to bring to it!

Don't be afraid to take advantage of everything the world has laid out for you. If you have a question, ask it. Take and earn everything. Be shameless, but moral about achieving your goals. Other people may - and will - guide you, but you are the only person who can get you where you need to be. These next few years, you are the only person wearing your head and walking in your shoes. Take care of yourself. Be proud of yourself. You've come this far!

The end of high school is an interesting time. We grow up, up, and away from the lives and people we've loved for what seems like decades. It's scary. It's difficult. But the act of graduating is the act of planting a seed in a new garden. With brightness and light, we become something beautiful and worthy of respect. We become who we need to be.

Now, as a senior, I feel very grown up - but still childish in wanting to wander the world. Thankfully, AHC gave me the opportunity to.