

## 2021 Convocation Remarks - Evan Glazer

Welcome back, IMSA. How do you feel?

My name is Evan Glazer, president of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. It's my first day of school, all over again, and I can't wait to get started here with you and finally *in person*. It is *cool* to be in school. It's my first school day at IMSA, so you should know a little about me. I was born and raised in Illinois, went to college in Illinois, and proud to say that after being away for over 20 years, I'm back and honored and humbled to be with you. After all, where else will you find a school where all of the students are smarter than the president? Since I have a few more years on my belt, maybe *capable* is a better word, along with inspired and can't wait to learn from and with you. You all have extraordinary potential, and our desire is to ignite and nurture creative, ethical and scientific minds to advance the human condition.

I'm so excited to welcome you to our first day at Convocation. It's such an exciting and interesting time in the academy's history.

[For the first speech only]: We are a school for science in a society that now recognizes more than ever the importance of science, and how that's enacted in school.

[use in 2nd speech]

And with us today, we have a whole section of distinguished guests here to celebrate with us. Among them are alumni who contribute so much to IMSA to this day, friends of IMSA and family members who believe in what IMSA can do for our future. I want to recognize and appreciate our local state Senator, Linda Holmes (wait for her to stand and be recognized). I also want to point out former colleagues who have transformed IMSA over the years, including:

Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall and President Emerita	Founding president
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Dr. Jose Torres President Emeritus	Past-president and
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Dale Arentsen (ARNT-sen)	Long-time head of security
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Rosemary Forny	Long-time and beloved Receptionist
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Dr. Raymond Dagenais	Former science faculty responsible for leading our science curriculum
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Dr. David Workman	Former science faculty who has influenced global collaboration
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Let's welcome them with a round of applause.

They are all safely spaced, of course, because our health and mitigation are so crucial at such a time in our history where we have all personally experienced the spread and response to COVID-19.

[first speech resume here] With the recent development of the vaccine, we can all be encouraged knowing that advancements in science can greatly improve the human condition because we are all able to come back and be here today after over a year on Zoom school, while still recognizing we can manage life through mitigation efforts, like physical distancing, wearing masks, temperature screening, surveillance testing and so many of you getting vaccinated. Thank you for vaxing up! The reality is COVID cases will happen, just like in years past, many of us have caught the common cold; however, what's different now is that with screening techniques it can be detected very early before symptoms develop. With protective measures, we can minimize spread and impact.

Two-thirds of you are new to campus, and so there's so much to learn from our seniors who will teach you about our culture – our norms, traditions, rituals, celebrations and acronyms. Yes, there is a lot to learn beyond the classroom, and that's one reason why coming back in person is so meaningful – not just for our students, but

also our faculty, resident counselors, and helpful people all around IMSA who have missed you.

I will say, right now in IMSA's history, is a call to be *United*, not just coming together in person, but to acknowledge what we have been through, not just as a community but how each and every one of us have been impacted through the pandemic. Personally, I can share that I have lost loved ones last year, struggled being in a room by myself at times without the physical presence of students, and even Zooming from a closet to find privacy at home. I'm sure you had troubling experiences, too, this past year, and have a bunch of crazy stories. Transitioning back to "normal" may feel good at first, however there are layers of unrest inside many of us that haven't gone away. Being in person will help, because now we can see and experience emotions in three dimensions! In our response, we will have to bring our most supportive, empathetic selves in our interactions in order to help each other feel well and connected in our community. I contend this will not be easy, as honest, vulnerable and forgiving conversations are necessary because, even with our best intentions, mistakes happen and we need to learn from them and from each other as friends and being part of the IMSA family.

To illustrate my point, I'd like to offer a story, originally shared by R. Roosevelt Thomas Jr, about the time when an elephant visited a neighbor, the giraffe.

“A giraffe had built this amazing new home. It was a wonderful custom-built home for the family, with soaring ceilings and tall doorways. High windows ensured maximum light and good views while protecting the family’s privacy. Narrow hallways saved valuable space without compromising convenience. So well done was the house that it won the National Giraffe Home of the Year Award. The home’s owners were understandably proud. One day the giraffe, while working in his state-of-the art woodshop in the basement, happened to look out the window. Coming down the street was an elephant. “I know him”, he thought. We worked together on a parent association committee. He is an excellent woodworker, too. I think I’ll ask him in to see my new shop. Maybe we can even work together on some projects.” So the giraffe reached his head out of the window and invited the elephant in.

The elephant was delighted; he had liked working with the giraffe and looked forward to knowing him better. Besides, he knew about the woodshop and wanted to see it. So he walked up to the basement door and waited for it to open. “Come in; come in” the giraffe said. But immediately they

encountered a problem. While the elephant could get his head in the door, he could go no further. "It's a good thing we made this door expandable to accommodate my woodshop equipment", the giraffe said. "Give me a minute while I take care of our problem". He removes some bolts and panels to allow the elephant in. The two acquaintances were happily exchanging woodworking stories when the giraffe's wife leaned her head down the basement stairs and called to her husband; "telephone, dear; it's your boss". "I better take that upstairs in the den," the giraffe told the elephant. "Please make yourself at home, this may take a while."

The elephant looked around and saw a half-finished project on the lathe table in the far corner, and decided to explore it further. As he moved through the doorway that led to that area of the shop, he heard an ominous scrunch. He backed out scratching his head. "Maybe I'll join the giraffe upstairs." he thought but as he started up the stairs, he heard them began to crack. He jumped off and fell back against the wall. It too begun to crumble. As he sat there disheveled and dismayed the giraffe came down the stairs. "What on earth is happening here?" The giraffe asked in amazement. "I was trying to make myself at home," the elephant said. The giraffe looked around, "Okay, I see the problem. The doorway, it is too narrow. We have to make you smaller. There's an aerobics studio

near here. If you take some classes there, we could get you down to size.” “Maybe,” the elephant stated, looking unconvinced. “And the stairs are too weak to carry your weight,” the giraffe continued. “If you go to ballet classes at night, I’m sure we can get you light on your feet. I really hope you’ll do it. I like having you here.” “Perhaps” the elephant said. “But to tell you the truth, I’m not sure that a house designed for a giraffe would ever really work for an elephant, not unless there are some major changes.”

And, alas, you can see this allegory can have numerous interpretations. It speaks to challenges that black and brown people have in our society with systemic racism; it speaks to some challenges that non-STEM enthusiasts have in a STEM school; and it speaks to newcomers to our campus, wondering whether and how they will fit in. After all, where else in the world would you find a wall of pillows that has such cultural meaning as a place to meet your friends, take pictures, and wonder about it’s true significance? In search of meaning, I’ve decided to declare a new acronym, PILLOW, which stands for Please, I’d Love to Learn Our Ways.

For those of you wondering, “am I meant to be here?” The answer is yes, you belong. For those of you wondering, am I wearing the right clothes, shoes or have the right hairstyle? The answer is yes, you belong. For those of you

wondering, will I be the smartest? The answer is no, there will always be something you don't know in search of truth and deeper meaning through your imagination and sense of inquiry, *and* you belong. For those of you wondering, do I have to be someone else when I am at IMSA?, the answer is no and yes. No, we want you to bring yourself and every facet of your identity so we can appreciate who you are, where you are from, and redesign the house with your influence. It doesn't matter if you have been here for three years or one week – you all matter. The other answer, yes, you are expected to change. As young adults, you will be challenged in so many ways with an expectation that you will transform and you will transform us, bettering yourselves, bettering us to tackle problems that don't have known solutions, to tackle inequity and injustice, all in effort to advance the human condition. With this in mind, I wish you a wonderful launch to the school year, and I look forward to getting to know you and learning more about what IMSA means to you and the aspirations you have to make the academy a better place for learning and growing, not just on your own, but *United*, with your new friends and IMSA family. Thank you.