

## 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Commencement Address given by Kevin James, Excel-East Boston '13



*Kevin James, a resident of East Boston with roots in Saint Kitts, entered Excel Academy as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader. A dedicated student and devoted classmate, Kevin was chosen by his teachers to deliver the commencement address in June 2013. Admired for his great sense of humor, he leaves Excel in high academic standing to attend City on a Hill Charter School where he hopes to continue being a good role model for his younger siblings and peers.*

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Are there times in life when you feel like you are the only person with no luck? Well that is how I felt when I heard my phone “Beep! Beep!” and my mom screamed, “You got accepted into Excel!” That brought me nightmares.

Hold up. You’re probably wondering, “Who is this kid and why is he speaking? He’s so negative about himself and Excel!” My name is Kevin James, I attended Excel since 2010. This makes me unique because I came in during my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year, but if you listen closely, my story is similar in lots of ways to my classmates; we all had struggles initially entering Excel. But things get better – so don’t give up yet!

Back to that awful day I found out I got into Excel. I thought about running away to a place where no one could find me. I thought, “I’ll die in that school. It’s way too strict for me. Black belts, socks, checking uniforms – that’s a waste of my time.” My mom and I argued over it but I didn’t win. We went to visit the school. We were at the old Excel, attached to a CVS – and the CVS was bigger than the school! It was small, the walls were close together; I thought “How can students move around here?” Then teachers started coming up to me, shaking my hand, and smiling a lot. This was freaking me out. I wasn’t accustomed to being that close up to my teachers on a regular basis, and I wondered, “How do these Excel students survive?” because I knew I couldn’t.

Arriving at 7:50 am, for my first day of school, I felt really awkward because I didn’t know anyone. I got off the bus and saw this huge, long line, and I thought there must be an emergency. I went up to the front and found that it was just a uniform line. Oh man. Things didn’t get better after that. My first week was horrendous. I got demerits, detentions, referrals...and eventually, suspensions. I didn’t like this school – having to sit up straight, follow all these rules, oh man! I thought, “No way can I handle this pressure.”

I gave up after first quarter. I knew I was being retained, and I didn’t care because I planned to get kicked out. Education didn’t mean anything to me. All that mattered was being with my friends from my old school. Throughout that year, a couple of teachers tried to help me realize that no matter what school I went to, the work will always be hard, but they were willing to help me figure out my strengths and weaknesses. I’d nod my head to make them stop talking! On the last day of school, I still believed I would get kicked out, but the Dean Mr. G, my teachers, and my mom refused to let me leave school until I agreed to come back to 7<sup>th</sup> grade next year.

I gave up on trying to get kicked out; it was not working at all. There always seemed to be someone blocking me from doing something *really* bad. My peers were even tough on me; they knew I could do it, even though I didn’t feel like it. I finally realized I needed a change and quickly. I had a talk with Mr. G to set manageable goals for my next year. Then Ms. Aponte reminded me that no matter what happened, she always saw a new Kevin inside of me. I realized I didn’t want to be the old bad Kevin. I wanted to be new Kevin.

School started again that fall. It was a different experience. I knew what the line out the door was all about; I was ready to shake hands and smile at ALL of my teachers and go to class and complete all my work.

Nothing would hold me back from success. I tried my hardest to build connections with my peers and teachers. At first, I didn't want to believe in myself, but I had to. It really paid off. My grades were so high that I achieved honor roll all year long. I worked together with my friends Destiny and Melissa; even though we weren't in Mandatory (the place I had to stay after school to complete homework), we started to develop some independence around our homework, and I was so proud that we were able to help one another achieve Honor Roll that first quarter! I went from Fs to Bs. It didn't happen like magic as I wished it would, it took a lot of courage, patience, and self-determination to turn my life around. This is the same for all Excel students. When we came in, we didn't automatically have As and Bs; some of us had Cs, some of us had Fs. But we pushed ourselves to reach our goals of honor roll, high school, and college. As the year went on, the work was getting harder, and everyone was asking questions – not “Why do we have to do this?” but “HOW do we do this?” We were getting older. We didn't have time to be insecure because high school and college are 10 times harder than middle school so we shouldn't complain.

I met my goals of having a successful retention in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and moving on to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This year has been different because we moved into a new building which was a LOT bigger and there were a lot of new teachers that we didn't know. I felt proud of my class for leading the school into the new building and leaving a legacy for the younger students. Who would've thought that I would think more about school and supporting other students who were in the same position I once was? All of my classmates were leaders: we talked to 6<sup>th</sup> graders before the English MCAS; we held conversations with the 5<sup>th</sup> graders in the bathroom line – asking them what they did in class and how it went; we led groups like YMLG, YWLG, and Honor Council.

Still, 8<sup>th</sup> grade work was complicated at times – we had to perform the Romeo & Juliet play, solve quadratic equations, and put on a Science Fair -- but I stayed focused and got help when I needed it. My peers, Maria, Omar, and Jackie, always helped me figure out my mistakes so I could understand them. I continued to be on the honor roll and I learned to control my anger and to do things that I know are right and will set me up to have a bright future. Sometimes I still have trouble choosing when to hang around people who could influence me irrationally. I got help this year from Mr. Ure, Ms. Heinricher, Ms. Long, and Larissa, who always help me realize people only get better by learning from their mistakes, so I don't think that one mistake eliminates all the good things I've done and who I am.

I thought going to Excel was going to be the WORST part of my life. It turns out, even with all the detentions and suspensions; I've grown into a person I'm proud to be here. When we go on to high school, we should always remember the struggles we had at Excel. Just like it was hard to transition INTO Excel, it may be hard to transition into high school, but we shouldn't give up. Like the old Kevin eventually became the new Kevin, we will all grow and change in high school and that can be a good thing. Excel is unique and it makes you unique. It has already changed us all in so many ways. We learned that we are not alone; there are always others around who can pick us up when we fall down. We've learned not to be afraid of our teachers because they are only trying to give us the best education possible. We've learned to be independent learners and thinkers, to choose the right friends, and to be above negative influences. We've learned to talk about our feelings when something doesn't feel right. We've learned from our peers and taught our teachers. Excel wasn't about being a follower, it was about being a leader and learning how to excel in the best way, and help others be on the same positive path as you. I hope we'll bring this with us to our new schools.

In the end, I don't regret going to Excel because it has changed me so much. It's unbelievable how proud I've made myself, my family, friends, and teachers with my hard work and accomplishments. You've all done this too. I want to thank all my classmates for their support. Congratulations for all your hard work and take all that knowledge into high school.