

## This Harvard Grad Gave a Powerful Speech on Race and Education



BY **MEGAN LASHER**

MAY 26, 2016

A lot of graduation speeches [inspire and move their audiences](#), but Harvard Graduate School of Education grad Donovan Livingston takes things to a whole new level. His speech, which was delivered as a spoken-word poem, critiqued racial injustice in the education system.

Livingston began with a quote from Horace Mann: “Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men.”

But he refutes this statement, saying that during Mann’s lifetime, African American people were persecuted for learning to read and write and that injustice hasn’t entirely faded. “For some, the only difference between a classroom and a plantation is time,” he said. “How many times must we be made to feel like quotas, like tokens in coined phrases: Diversity and inclusion.”

Livingston reflected on his own schooling, saying, “I’ve always been a thorn in the side of injustice: Disruptive, talkative, a distraction with a passion that transcends the confines of

my own consciousness, beyond your curriculum, beyond your standards.” He said that when he was younger, his teacher taught him that “our stories are the ladders that make it easier for us to touch the stars, so climb and grab them.” And that’s what he pledges to pass on to his students.

Livingston says being a teacher reminds him that each person is meant to have a massive impact: “At the core, none of us were meant to be common, we were born to be comets, darting across space and time, leaving our mark as we crash into everything. A crater is a reminder that something amazing happened right here, an indelible impact that shook up the world—are we not astronomers searching for the next shooting star?”

However, he relates this idea back to Mann’s quote about education, saying, “injustice is telling [students] they are stars without acknowledging the night that surrounds them. Injustice is telling them education is the key while you continue to change the locks. Education is no equalizer: rather, it is the sleep that precedes the American dream, so wake up.”

“I’ve been the black hole in the classroom for far too long, absorbing everything without allowing my light to escape,” Livingston said. “But those days are done, I belong among the stars and so do you, and so do they.”

**Read more:** [Lin-Manuel Miranda to Grads: ‘Your Stories Are Essential’](#)

It's the speech [Harvard University](#) is calling "the most powerful, heartfelt" speech "you will ever hear."

Donovan Livingston, a master's graduate at the university, was chosen by a committee of faculty, staff and students to speak at the School of Education's convocation, a rep for Harvard told ABC News.

Instead of a traditional speech, Livingston used spoken word to perform his poem, "Lift Off."

Livingston told ABC News that the "true inspiration behind the piece" was the fact that he couldn't perform a poem when he gave his commencement remarks during his senior year of high school.

"The teacher who was in charge...threatened to take me offstage or cut my microphone when she caught wind that I wanted to incorporate a poem," he recalled. "She wanted it to be traditional. So I complied, but I really wanted to address my class in my most authentic voice, which is what I said onstage Wednesday."

The poem spoke about racial inequalities in the educational system, what it means to be black at Harvard and inspired the class of 2016 to use their roles as future educators to help others realize their full potential.

Livingston told his fellow classmates in part:

"I've been a black hole in the classroom for far too long;  
Absorbing everything, without allowing my light to escape.  
But those days are done. I belong among the stars.  
And so do you. And so do they.  
Together, we can inspire galaxies of greatness  
For generations to come.  
So no, sky is not the limit. It is only the beginning.  
Lift off."

Livingston -- who hopes to become a faculty member or an administrator at a university one day -- said he did not expect to get a standing ovation, nor did he expect the speech to go viral.

"My wife kind of did," he admitted. "But I didn't know it would be so well received. Whenever you put yourself out there especially with poetry, you're making yourself vulnerable. However it was received, I would've felt great at the end of the day because I was being myself, but the fact that it blew up the way it did is a humbling experience."

Livingston now plans to support his wife Lauren as she enters her second year of medical school at Wake Forest University and start his PhD program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro this fall.

It makes sense for the son of two educators: His father is a retired principal and his mother is a speech pathologist, working with special needs students.

"I've always been around education, but I didn't know it was something I was really passionate about until I got to college and looked around and saw ... that everything I did catered to college access [and] college success. It felt natural," the Winston-Salem, North Carolina, resident said. "I'm just really happy to carry on the legacy of my mother and father and I'm just grateful to walk in their footsteps."

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Poëtische afstudeerspeech van Amerikaanse student Donovan Livingston veroverd met recht en reden het internet  
27 mei 2016

Donovan Livingston studeert dit jaar af aan de Amerikaanse elite-universiteit Harvard. En traditiegewijs horen daar natuurlijk ook emotionele speeches bij. Livingston zorgt met zijn bijzondere performancegedicht 'Lift Off' voor een pijnlijke confrontatie van racisme en haar gevolgen ... Dat maakt duidelijk heel wat los, want de speech is sinds eergisteren al meer dan 5 miljoen keer bekeken. "No, sky is not the limit. It is only the beginning." We horen het hem graag zeggen

[Lift Off](#)

## The Sky Is Not the Limit. It Is Only the Beginning

As students, we need people to help us see what we can be. As teachers, we need to help students see what they can be. Education is, ultimately, a great leap of faith into one’s potential. At its best, education is a great liberator— one that helps people leap over the obstacles they encounter along their paths to their goals and dreams. It is in this spirit of hope and optimism that Harvard graduate student Donovan Livingston delivered his convocation speech titled “Lift Off.”

### Questions

1. Donovan Livingston divides his spoken-word poem between his experience as a student and his obligation as a teacher. How does he characterize himself as a student in this poem? Then describe how he sees the role of a teacher. Include examples from the text to support explanations.
2. Throughout the poem, Livingston transforms the language of various disciplines—math and astronomy, for example—into figurative speech to convey his ideas. He also uses figurative language that is unassociated with school subjects. Find three examples of his use of figurative language and, for each example that you quote, explain what it means and why it matters in the larger context of the poem.
3. Discuss what Livingston means in the last line of the poem. Also, include in your explanation how these lines relate to your education and education in general.

## Lift Off: Harvard Graduation Speech

March 10, 2017

Donovan Livingston graduated from Harvard University in 2016. He was asked to speak at the graduation so he did. Donovan wrote a poem called "Lift Off". In it he spoke of his life. His ancestors and slavery. He spoke of a new hope. A hope that kids can have to reach for the stars and to be up with them. He spoke of how each and every person has the ability to succeed and to exceed any expectations set for them. In his closing line, Livingston said "They say that the sky's the limit, but it is only the beginning. Lift off." His speech was one of power and he used many rhetorical devices.

Livingston was a Harvard graduate and to establish himself more as a speaker he talked about how he had given a similar type of speech at his high school graduation. He used pathos when talking about his life. About what he was like in school and how his teacher used his energy to make him a great speaker. The logos used was that he was one of the top members in his class and so he knew what he was talking about. Livingston used many hand and head motions when talking and it was fun to watch him and his passion when he was talking. He used good pauses and got loud when he needed to but ended in a softer tone which allowed his message to resonate. It was a powerful speech and a very inspiring one.

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**[Sophie Wise](#)** **[May 6, 2017 at 2:17 PM](#)**

I've heard that most graduation speeches, whether high school or college, tend to be rather similar. I am sure that this is one resides in a class of its own. His powerful rhetoric gives the listener the ability and reason to feel inspired