

Night of the Notables Speech

First of all, I want to say how impressed I am with all the notables I'm seeing here at Floris elementary! There's this person, that person, etc. You guys have done a great job, this is really fun.

Second, I want to say how honored I am to have been chosen as a notable person from here in Washington, and how humbled I am to be here in such exalted company! I very much appreciate the opportunity to be here with you and to talk to you about being notable.

So what's notable about me? Well, one thing is that I run ThinkFun, a company that makes games. I get to make games for a living... so how cool is that?

I hope that all of you got a chance to take a look at some of our games over on the table in the corner. Just to give me a sense of you guys, I want to know if you've ever heard of our games. How many of you know Rush Hour, for example? OK, that's great.

So I make games for a living, and that's pretty notable. Not only that, but I get to make exactly the kind of games that I myself like best – what we call Mind Challenging Games. The kind of games we make are really fun to play, and they also stretch your brain and make you a better thinker while you're having fun playing them. Right now, my company, ThinkFun, is the world leader in creating and selling these kind of games. When my wife Andrea and I started the company 21 years ago - and back then, it was a very small company, called Binary Arts – this was our dream, to have the leading company in the whole world selling brainteaser puzzles and mind challenging games. (By the way, I want to point out Andrea, she and I are partners, we've been married and working together for 21 years now, and she's every bit as notable as I am.)

So we're living our dream. And how cool is that?

And best of all, we have a great team of people who work at ThinkFun now, they do all the hard stuff at the company like sending the bills and making sure everything works right, so I can spend my time doing the stuff I like to do best. That's pretty cool too.

I suppose that it's notable that I have a cool job and get to do the things that I really like to do. Some of the truly notable people that you are representing probably had this in their lives also. But I don't think that was really enough for any of them. And it's not enough for me either.

For me, having these things is a blessing, and it's also an opportunity to do something that really makes a difference in people's lives.

So I want to take a minute and talk to you a little bit about my dream.

I believe that it is possible to change the way math education is taught in this country, and maybe to influence the entire education system... and maybe even change the way education is taught all around the world. Maybe that sounds a little crazy, but think about it... how would you guys feel if you got to have more fun at school, and played more games that you really liked playing... if the trade off is that you get smarter in the way you think and work harder because you like what you're doing more. Can I have a show of hands? How many of you guys would like to have more fun in school and learn more at the same time?

So at least it looks like there is a market for this idea.

Well, I've been working on it. I want to share a couple of highlights with you of what we've been doing.

- A year and a half ago, working with Colvin Run elementary school in Vienna, we created a ThinkFun Game Night program for a fundraiser they were having at Barnes and Noble. Barnes and Noble loved this program, and we are now official partners with them, and right now they are in the process of training managers from 500 of their stores around the country, this Fall they'll be going out to local elementary schools and convincing teachers and parents to have ThinkFun Game Nights at Barnes and Noble.
- Colvin Run has a program in their school called "Strategies Lab". This is an official school program with a dedicated classroom space, where students come in classes with their teachers to play games for an hour each month, to learn problem solving skills. This Monday, I'm part of a team from Colvin Run that is going to be presenting this program to the 90 Gifted Resource Teachers across Fairfax county. If it works, I think we can create a system and offer the program to schools across the country.
- A week from tomorrow, we're hosting the third annual Arlington County MathDice competition, about 15 schools from around Arlington county are going to be competing in this great math skills game we sell. And by the way, MathDice is a game that was invented by our son Sam, as part of a sixth grade math project seven years ago. When he first came up with it, I thought it was a neat game... but I really came to realize how cool it was when I started playing with our son Mike, who was in third grade then, and he learned exponents as a third grader so he could get good enough to beat me.
- And then the week after that, I fly to Canada for a conference that a friend of mine is giving for teachers there, he's a university professor who has created a program called "Math Fair", which is like Science Fair except kids make brainteaser puzzles and everybody goes to each other's booths and tries to solve the puzzles that they've created.

So I guess this makes me notable. I have a really cool job that I love, my whole family is included in the business in a way that really works for us, I have a dream that what I am doing can really make a big difference in people's lives, and I get to spend my time working on how to make this come true.

I want to tell you one more story, and then finish with some thoughts about being notable, and some advice for you guys specifically.

The story I want to tell is about how Andrea and I decided to start ThinkFun to begin with. Andrea always wanted to start a business, and I was having trouble figuring out what I wanted to do with my life... we were working for a real estate company when we met, and we quickly agreed we wanted to be working for ourselves. But the question was, why would we decide to start a puzzle and game company, especially since we didn't have any experience at all with the toy or game industry.

Well, I've always liked puzzles. It's not like I was a super brain or was the best person in the world with them. But my great aunt, Auntie Adele, used to tell a story about how she and I would play puzzles together when I was still in diapers... if I saw where a piece fitted in before her, I would grab it and – at least the way she told the story – I'd look at her and say, "You're Tupid!" So I had puzzling in my blood somehow.

But the most important influence was my father's best friend, Mr. Keister... our families were very close, but Mr. Keister was this genius guy, an amazing creative person who seemed like he could do anything. One of the things he did was to invent mechanical puzzles... my Mom loved his puzzles, and when he came out with a new one, she'd ask if he would make a few of them for her so she could give them out as Christmas presents... and she would always save one for me. My dad loved puzzles too, so puzzles were just a nice part of our family when I was growing up. They gave me a really good feeling, though I never thought about them as a business.

But I did save all of Mr. Keister's puzzles, and had them out on my desk at work. Then one day, Andrea said to me, "Hey, why don't we start a business selling Mr. Keister's puzzles?" And it was like a lightbulb going off... this was something I really loved, there were great feelings about my mom and dad and also in a weird way I just knew I had great instincts about puzzles, and so we jumped on the idea.

Now if I had a lot more time I'd tell you about the early days, I'm hoping we can have some questions and answers at the end. We really struggled for a lot of years, it has not been easy, I promise... but in this talk I want to emphasize the positive. And I'm now getting to the part where I give you guys my advice about life, which I'm really excited to do.

So let's recap.

I get to make games for a living, which is really cool. As part of this, I have a vision for how I think I, and we, can make a difference in the world, which I'm very passionate about. Before Andrea and I started doing this, I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life, it's not like I had some master plan. But it turns out that one of the greatest things about this idea is that it came from something that I really liked when I was a kid,

even though at the time I had no idea that puzzles and games were something I could make a living at.

Getting ready for this talk reminded me of something that I've always wondered about. I have a pretty good memory of being a kid your age myself... I'm not sure if all grownups have this, but I do. And one of the things I remember thinking about when I was your age, was the question of when you became an adult, and how this happened. I sort of imagined that a bolt of lightning hit, or something like this. I remember sort of worrying about it, actually.

Well, I'm glad to say that, for me at least, there was never a lightning bolt. Of course I grew and changed, and really important things happened – Andrea and I got married, my parents died, we had Sam and Mike – but this is what life is all about. When you think about it, how much have you all changed since the time you were babies? So I'm very happy to say that I am still the same person now that I was back when I was your age.

So I've been thinking about this, and I wanted to share with you some of my thoughts about what it means to grow up, and also to talk a little bit about what it means to be notable.

If you're like me, as you grow up you'll notice some things.

First, your character, the essence of who you are, is likely to stay the same. Each one of you is an individual, and you all have different things that you are good at and that you enjoy in your life. For some of you it might be reading, for others it might be math... but I'm not talking just about school. Some of you may love playing with your dog, or play an instrument, or doodling.

What I want to tell you is that it doesn't matter whether this seems important, or “worthy”, now. I remember when I was a kid, thinking that other kids were smarter than me or whatever, and wondering if that meant I didn't measure up somehow. I really loved playing football, playing army in the woods and riding my bike, as I said I liked puzzles, but I never imagined that I would be invited as a grownup to talk to a school as a “notable” person.

What does matter, is that you should give yourself permission to really love the things you love, and to be yourself. There are going to be things that you worry about... that happens with all of us. But if you think that you want to be a notable person yourself when you get to be a grownup, the best thing for you to do now is to commit to yourself that you're going to go the extra mile to really do something good with the things that you already like to do. Doing that is called passion... and the best way to become notable is to be passionate in your life. I bet that all of your notable people had passion in their lives, that may be the one thing that they all have in common.

One thing that does change is that you gain more experience in life as you continue to grow. All of you already have done this yourselves... remember, you all used to be

babies... and this will continue. Things that are new to you now and that might seem scary, will get easier as you get more experience with them. And, things that you might worry about now, or even that you might not like about yourselves, you will find that as you grow and gain experience, you can grow to love these things about yourself.

And this leads me to the next point I want to make. And that is, that even though your character will likely stay with you for your whole life, you do have a choice about the kind of life you want to lead, and what attitude you will take in your life.

Your notables all made a choice in their lives to make a difference, I'm sure of that.

You don't need to choose to do something "important" or "meaningful"... you're just kids, it's not time to worry about that stuff yet. But you can make a choice, now and for the rest of your lives, that you will stand for good rather than for bad, and that you will appreciate the things you love, and that you will reach out and embrace the things that you are curious about, rather than choosing to not reach out. You each can make a choice to do these things, and you can make this choice any time you want. And I promise you, your lives will be richer and more rewarding if you choose to live this way.

And later... when the time is right... some of you will choose to be notable, to embrace some grand passion and to really make a difference in the world. None of us can predict now who among you this will be... but I will tell you this, that it can be any of you. It doesn't matter if today you think you're great or if you just think you're average. Later, when it's time, you may find that you have a life's passion... and if you believe that you can act on this, you really can reach for the stars.

Finally, I want to talk a little bit about what it means to be notable.

All of the notable people you have studied, are famous because they made such a big difference in the world. Our puzzles and games make a big difference in kids' lives, and I have a dream that we can change how schools are run so that kids can get a better education... I'm very proud of this, and I'd like to think that this is notable as well.

But people can be notable without being famous too. One group of people who I think are very notable, are your teachers. Think about it... your teachers have dedicated their lives to helping you grow up, teaching you how to read and write and all the other stuff, of course, but also teaching you about values, about right and wrong. I'm sure that every one of the notables you have studied would have one or two of their teachers that they could point to who made a big difference in their lives, and I bet you do as well. Your teachers aren't famous, but they are all notable, because of the work they are doing with you.

There's another group who is notable too, even though they may not be famous. And that's your parents. How many of you here love your parents? Give me a show of hands, please. Well I'll tell you one thing that I know, and that's that your parents love you so much. A few minutes ago, I told you that you have the ability to make a choice in your

life to be good, and to care. Well, your parents have made that choice, they've chosen to love you and to raise you the best that they possibly can. I hope you're all proud of your parents the way that they are proud of you.

So I have one thing left to tell you as I close. You have all spent the last month studying your notable person, and learning all about them. I hope you all had great fun with this, and learned a lot.

What I want to tell you is that each and every one of you can be a notable person. Some of you will be famous, some of you will be passionate about what you do in life, some of you will be solid citizens who can be relied on by your friends and neighbors, and many of you will be wonderful, notable parents to your own children.

Just remember. You will always be the person you are now, and you have the choice each and every day to be passionate about the things that the things you love best, and to do good in your life. Do this, and you can live your dream, just like I'm doing now.