

## 2015 Sports Awards Speech

Good Evening, as my good friend and classmate, John O'Brien, mentioned, my name is Vincent LaPuma and I graduated Cathedral in 2001. When John asked me to give this speech, I admit, I was a bit hesitant. Hesitant because I am not a fan of public speaking, I never have been. I thought about it for a few days. I remembered sitting in the very seats that you are all sitting in tonight. I remembered working hard throughout the year and looking forward to the sports awards dinner. I came to the conclusion that I owed it back to Cathedral to give the speech. For all that Cathedral for me while I was here and since I graduated.

I want to speak to you tonight about being an underdog and being looked at differently by others. Two stereotypes that are almost always associated with being a Cathedral Man. I am going to speak about my family and myself as an example of that and how being a Cathedral man helps you overcome anytime you feel like that underdog, or when you feel like everyone else looks at you differently.

I grew up in Maspeth, Queens. That was where my parents bought their first home and still live in to this day. My parents migrated to New York from Sicily in the early 1970's. Not knowing English, my mother and her sisters attended Long Island City High School while my grandfather worked in the fire proofing union and my grandmother in a garment factory. Not being able to speak the language put them at an immediate disadvantage-Underdogs. They were ridiculed, teased, even abused physically at times, but they never quit. They forged on learning the English language enough to get by and achieve their goal, to graduate high school.

My father grew up in an orphanage in Sicily from the age of four until he was 16 years old. My dad's father, my grandfather, had passed away at a young age and my grandmother was unable to support their two girls and six boys. She kept the girls at home and raised them herself, the boys were all sent to the orphanage that was run by priests and nuns at the time. At the age of 6, my father watched his 5 year old brother die of a stomach illness. He was left to die without any treatment. At 16 my father left the orphanage as an underdog for Florence, Italy where he studied the auto mechanic trade. As a perfectionist, my father mastered his trade. To this day there is no car that my father can't fix. He came to America and subsequently married my mother in the mid 1970's.

My parents had three children. My older sister Luisa, myself, and my younger brother Anthony. Growing up, we started out living in a 2-bedroom apartment in Maspeth in a home owned by my aunt. Needless to say, it was tight. My mother didn't work as myself and my siblings were all born within a 5 year span. My father, was working as a mechanic earning minimum wage. Even at minimum wage, my parents made it work. They never gave up. My father was able to secure a job as a manager at an auto repair shop. At that point, things started looking better. My parents were able to put all three of us through Catholic grammar school, still with only my father's income. My father never wanted my mother to work as long as we were still in grammar school. It wasn't until we hit high school that my mother started working as a cook at Lavarone Brothers in Maspeth. By this time, my father had taught himself how to read and write English as well as speak it fluently, albeit with a heavy Italian accent. It always amazes me that he was able to do that without taking a single course at any school.

As we hit high school, my father was working two jobs. From 7:00am-2:00pm he had an auto repair shop in Astoria Queens that occupied his time. 2:30-10:30 was his shift as American Airlines inside La Guardia Airport as an auto mechanic. My father, who grew up in an orphanage where a single pair of shoes had to last years, who moved to America not knowing a word of English, not knowing how to read, write or communicate in English was now working for one the biggest airlines in the world. My father just hit his 25th year of service at American Airlines. My mother, to this day, at 58 years old, still wakes up every day and cooks for a living at a restaurant. Not because she has to, because she has a passion for cooking. My father now works one job at American Airlines. He still does his "side jobs" in the backyard basically as a hobby. But I want to tell you a quick story about my father's passion-Cars. As you all know this past winter was one of the coldest in recent history. My father, suffering from arthritis, could barely clench his fist in the winter because of the cold. He has almost no feeling in his fingertips. On a Saturday afternoon, I go visit him at the house. Sure enough he's in the yard fixing a woman's car. The woman happened to be a single mother with two children. I said to him "Dad, it's 6 degrees outside, tell the woman you just can't fix it for this weekend. It's going to have to wait until the weather warms up a bit." His response to me was "I have to fix it now because otherwise the woman will not be able to take her kids to school on Monday morning". At that point I realized that my father always recalls his childhood and the challenges single parents face. There was nothing I could say. He continued on and fixed the car.

When I was getting ready to graduate St. Stan's in 1997, I had three choices of schools, Molloy, McClancy & Christ the King. I didn't even

know Cathedral existed. Another classmate of mine had already committed to Cathedral. I was a shy kid, I wasn't into big crowds. My parents thought I would be lost in one of the bigger schools. We decided to contact Cathedral and see if there was anything we could do. Turns out there was. I came on an interview with Fr. Calise at the time. I toured the school and immediately told my parents that I wanted to come here. I attended the Fr. Troike program that summer and was pretty much at the school every day from that summer until I graduated 4 years later. My time here was amazing. I got to know all of the teachers, I knew every student, and I got to play basketball which I loved. The first time our team stepped out on the court, I knew we were underdogs. We were always playing bigger, stronger, more athletic teams. But our team had passion. We despised losing. And although those teams outmatched us, we won. And we won a lot. Our hard work, dedication and teamwork paid off. By the time I was a Junior our varsity team was in the CHSAA City Championship game against Moore Catholic. We had done the impossible that year and beat Salesian in the semi-final game. The excitement must have drained us, we ended up losing that championship game by three points that year. As a senior the following year, we were determined to get back to that championship game. We had an unbelievable season with a record of 18-5 under the tutelage of Coach Jim Dilg who had come out of coaching retirement the year before to lead our varsity team. Two of our five losses came at the hands of our arch nemesis, Regis. It was frustrating to say the least. We made it back to the championship game that year and our opponent was none other than the undefeated Reigs Raiders. It was a great game and in the end, we got what we wanted; a dominating 16-point win and the first NYC CHSAA Championship in

Cathedral history. No team was going to take that game from us. We were a major underdog but our passion as Cathedral men shined that night. We ended our season 21-6.

When I was a freshmen, my intentions were to only play basketball. It had been the only sport I had played since I was a kid at St. Stan's. Following the basketball season my freshmen year, baseball coach Pat Higgins approached me about playing baseball. I immediately thought back to the only season I played little league baseball. What a disaster that was. I immediately said NO! I didn't even have a glove. If you've ever met Pat Higgins, then you know his mentality was on the same level as most students, and that's why everyone loved him as a teacher and as a coach. After nagging me to come to the first practice, I agreed to go just to see what it was about. I borrowed a glove from a friend. When I arrived, I had zero knowledge of baseball. I knew nothing. Pat took me to the side along with John O'Brien, who was "THE" baseball player at the school in our class. He said "John's going to teach you how to pitch". John literally taught me how to pitch. From the stance, to the wind up, to the release. I was hooked. Baseball was life after basketball ended. My sophomore year here at Cathedral I played on the JV baseball team and we ended up winning a championship. By the time I was a Junior, on the varsity team, I won the batting title. And by the time I was a senior I was the MVP of the baseball team, and we came within one game of winning the championship. I have two people to thank for that, Pat Higgins for always nagging me and John O'Brien for teaching me how to play.

Currently, along with another alum Gary Lombardo from the class of 2000, I own Grand Insurance Agency. A full service property & casualty insurance agency specializing in commercial insurance. Gary & I started

our agency from scratch in 2007 without a single client. Today, 8 1/2 years later, we have over \$5,000,000 in written premium. When we started, they said we wouldn't make it. They said it's impossible to start from scratch. We were underdogs. Today, we are a strong and successful business.

My point in telling you these stories is this: as a Cathedral Man, embrace being the underdog. Being an underdog gives you passion. Passion to overcome any obstacle, whether it be in school, on the field, on the court or eventually in your career. When people look at you differently embrace that. Store it in your mind and then go out and do great things. And those same people who look at you different will start admiring you. You're a Cathedral Man. You are taught to be respectful, honest, caring men. As teenagers and amongst your friends that may not be the "cool" thing to be, but I guarantee that if you stick to those values as you grow, you will gain respect and admiration wherever your life takes you.

Congratulations to all the student athletes here tonight, to the coaches- thank you for your tireless efforts on behalf of Cathedral and our athletes, and to the parents and families, know that we are proud of your sons who represented Cathedral with honor and pride this year.

Remember-When you walk into this building, there's a banner that says "Forming Men of Greatness". That's not just a slogan. It's the truth. Embrace it. God bless you all.