Jeffery Garrett’s candid recollection about not that many years ago being a Newark High School student at the annual Academic Excellence Awards dinner and not having a clue about what he really wanted to do after high school, may have brought a welcome sigh of relief to students at this year’s event who may be grappling with similar indecision.

Especially when they learned Garrett eventually “fell in love with the idea of teaching” and now is loving his first year as a special education teacher at Perkins School.

As NHS 9th and 10th grade English and Film Studies teacher Chelsea Fladd, who coordinated the November 5th event, enumerated Garrett’s accomplishments to 10th -12th grade students being honored for earning an average of 90 or better during each quarter of the 2018-19 school year and other dinner guests, it was clear Garrett’s initial career uncertainty didn’t hinder him.

“Since graduating from NHS in 2012, Mr. Garrett has been able to secure not one, but two Associates Degrees from FLCC prior to heading to Nazareth College where he was able to secure an additional two Bachelor’s Degrees, majoring in Psychology and Inclusive Education,” Fladd said. “In 2018 he received the Inclusive Education Award from Nazareth that further propelled his success into being chosen as a clinical assistant in his graduate program last year. This December will conclude Mr. Garrett’s journey, for now, in earning degrees as he will complete his Masters in Inclusive Education.

“Outside of academics, Mr. Garrett excelled in the sporting arena at NHS. In 2012, he was the Section V Class B 100 Breaststroke champion and won first time all-league in baseball during his junior and senior year. He was also awarded the Outstanding Male Athlete in 2012 based upon his athleticism overall.

“Anyone who knows Mr. Garrett knows he is very social and wants to include everyone whenever possible. His contagious smile and jubilant demeanor has been shared in all aspects of his life and now is influencing the students in his classroom. His genuine concern for others is not only contagious but also refreshing. These qualities only further exemplify Mr. Garrett’s smiling face on NHS’s Wall of Fame.

“All of these outstanding achievements and qualities led Mr. Garrett to be the leader he is today. He is the quintessence of accomplishing his ambitions and following his dreams of achievement which have led to his success. He started out in the same way you all did: as students in the same desks you sit in every day! Mr. Garrett set goals in his life and took charge of how he was going to accomplish them. He is the epitome of personal victory.”

Garrett’s perspective on his career path was refreshingly upbeat as he explained that it was often fraught with unknowns.

“I am unbelievably grateful for this opportunity to share something with you all. Being that I am just starting my teaching journey back here at Newark, I feel that I’m not qualified to be speaking to all of you. It feels like yesterday that I was at this dinner, wondering _and quite frankly, freaking out about_ what was in store for me next. You’re sitting here tonight probably thinking that what I’m about to
“So there are three small parts to my speech this evening; the first being directed at everyone, but especially the sophomores in the room” Garrett continued. “This part is called ‘the unknown is okay’—as a high schooler, I thought I had a plan a few different times. In reality, I had no idea what I wanted to do, and the occasional idea I did have certainly wasn’t related to what I do now. This is perfectly fine; you’re sophomores, and have two years to figure it out. So write down the ideas that pop into your head, do some research, and just think about what you’re passionate about. This stage of unknown won’t last forever, and trust me, it will all come together. If you’re a junior or senior who is sitting here and are also in the unknown, that’s okay too—we all have different plans and timelines; but I’ll get to that in a little bit. Just know that by sitting in this room tonight, you’re already on the right path, you just may not know it yet.

“Now on to part two, which is called “have a plan (eventually)”—this part is directed more towards the juniors and seniors in the room. I want to caution you, I was the person that didn’t have a plan, which is why this part is so important. When I say to have a plan, I just mean to have a plan that will bridge you to whatever is next. My plan, after a whole lot of procrastinating, was to go to community college to “figure out” what I wanted to do. In retrospect, this was the best thing I could have done for myself, as it gave me time to have the experiences that led me to where I am now. For me, those experiences were a few different jobs, living at home, and going to school. So, juniors and seniors, when the time is right, just make a plan. If you know exactly what you want to do, that’s amazing—go after it and attack it head on. If you’re still stuck in that unknown, that’s also amazing, but you have some more work to do; make a plan to bridge you to where you want to be. Whether that is a job, community college, trade school, or whatever else helps you find your passion, do it. In the long run, it’s those experiences that help you figure out who you are and help you grow the most.

“This brings me to my last part, called it’s not a race, but a journey”—this is for everyone, but especially the seniors that will be graduating in June. There was a time, about 4 years ago, when all my friends from high school were graduating from college. At that time, I was just starting at Nazareth College, at 21 years old, living in a freshmen dorm. It felt disheartening at the time, but as I look back on it now, there was nothing to be discouraged about. I already had earned two associate’s degrees (a liberal arts degree and business degree, nothing to do with education) and finally had a plan to follow, sort of. I actually came to Naz thinking I wanted to do music therapy, but instead fell in love with the idea of teaching. Four years later, I have two bachelor’s degrees (one in psychology and the other in education) and in a month I will have my master’s in education. Nothing about my journey is perfect, and nothing about your journey will be either—the most important part is to understand that you’re not racing against some arbitrary clock that expires at a certain time. The only person you have to please is yourself, and it truly doesn’t matter how long that takes. There will be times you feel like you’re ‘behind,’ but trust me, you’re right on time.

“Regardless of where you fall, one thing remains true; the decisions you’ve made so far and will continue to make until graduation will set you up for the future. The future will take you many places, some near and far—for me, the future brought me back home. Newark is where I grew up, played sports, fell in love, and so much more. Because of this, I couldn’t see myself working anywhere else. I want to give as much to this community as it gave to me as I grew up. Some of you will stay here, and some will not, and that’s perfectly fine—the point is, regardless of where you end up, being in this room tonight proves to me that you are on a path to succeed in whatever it is you will do.

“If there is one thing I ask you to take from tonight, it’s to do what you’re passionate about. If you don’t know what that is, that’s okay. Have a plan to figure out how you’ll bridge the gap to it, and don’t worry about racing to the finish line. Your journey is and will be perfect for you and take as long as it needs to take. Thank you!”

Garrett is engaged to 2015 NHS graduate Ciera Lancaster who will graduate from Nazareth College in December with two Bachelor’s degrees—one in English and one in Inclusive Education.
Later, NHS Principal Tom Roote shared how he could relate to Garrett’s journey.

“Prior to taking the microphone tonight, I was inspired by Mr. Garrett’s words regarding navigating the unknown period in one’s life. His thoughts prompted me to comment on how humbling it was for me to be a part of the ceremony as I was standing among students with a gift I have never possessed. Most of my talent is born of grit and determination, as opposed to a high level of intelligence. As I spoke I was reminded of the unknown period of my life after college that was a year working in Yellowstone National Park. My time spent understanding my journey to Yellowstone turned my unknown future into something a bit clearer.”

After welcoming everyone and congratulating students on their outstanding academic achievement, Roote and Assistant Principal Robyn Ross-Squirrell presented students being honored with certificates of recognition for their academic achievement.

But before that, Ross-Squirrell, who taught fifth grade at Kelley School for 10 years, shared a few words.

“It is a pleasure and honor to be here to recognize and congratulate our students for their hard work, determination and perseverance in reaching this goal of academic achievement,” she said. “These characteristics and traits — hard work, determination and perseverance — start at home. Thanks to parents and families for instilling this mindset in your children. I’m the lucky one to have seen so many of these students grow not only academically, but socially and emotionally with confidence from the little faces at Kelley School to now young adults in high school. Congratulations on this well-deserved awards night.”

Class of 2020 students recognized included Alison Avery, Phoebe Bates, Anna Bouwens, McKenna Briggs, Adria Brown, Kelsie Bushart, Benjamin Cepulo, Sami Chamberlain, Alycia Divelbliss, Hannah Fisher, Cherylanne Garrett, Andrew Greene, Lynzee Havert, Emma Healy, Matthew Hutten, Julia Kellogg, McKenna Kersten, Gracie Ketcham, Evelyn LoTempio, Lauren MacTaggart, McKinley Miller, Nadia Rothpearl, Emily Tang, Madeline Tulloch, Kayla Williams and McKenna Williamson.


Dinner guests included Superintendent Matt Cook, Krista Lewis, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Monica Stadler, Director of Pupil Services, Board of Education President Russell Harris and BOE members and parents Yvonne MacTaggart and Rebecca Vermeulen, other parents and guests.

Fladd thanked everyone for attending and those involved in the Academic Excellence Awards Dinner.

“Thank you parents, board members and administrators for being here tonight to celebrate all of these wonderful and deserving individuals. This is the fifteenth year that the Rewards and Incentives Committee has hosted the Academic Excellence Awards Dinner,” she said. “Tonight’s dinner, prepared by Michele Backus, Warren Bushart along with their staff the will be served by the following members of our faculty: Lindsey Walters, Lori Reed, Elaine Esan, Haley Curley, Justin Fladd, Alex Hennessy, Jennifer Johnson and Shannon Hersh.

She also noted that students who had been recognized for two or more consecutive years at the Academic Excellence Awards dinner would receive an athletic pass. This pass will allow these students to attend all athletic events for the upcoming year at NHS for free.