

## **Jordy Tessier – Prefect (Service & Environment)**

### **Keynote Speech 2025**

Good morning, Mr Featherston, Mr Angus, Dr Swann, Ms White, staff, boys and my parents. In 2004, my parents lost their son and my brother Bailey to an aggressive brain cancer when he was just two years old.

It's a tragedy that still doesn't feel real, even though I've lived in its shadow my whole life. I never got to meet him. But I've come to know him through the stories my family shares, and something truly remarkable was born out of something unbearable.

After losing Bailey, my parents set up a fundraiser to support Bailey's oncologist, Dr Peter Downie, who is ironically an Old Boy of this school and stands in our Hall of Fame today. He had a vision for an oncology fellowship program in the hope of training more bright young doctors to treat the children who are sick today.

Thus began Bailey's Day. Over the past 22 years, it has raised over \$5.2 million and funded the training of 22 new doctors. But more than the number, more than the fundraising events or successes, it's what Bailey's Day stands for that truly matters. It's about giving families the support, care and hope that my parents didn't have. About making sure that no one ever has to face the same horror alone.

At first, Bailey's Day was a way for my parents to survive something unimaginable. To turn their grief into action. To make the hardest thing any parent can go through just a little bit easier for someone else. Better hospitals. Better supports. Better care. So that families facing the worst days of their lives might at least be surrounded by love, support, and dignity.

But over time, it has grown into something even bigger; it has become a story of community, of how, when people show up with empathy and open hearts, something extraordinary happens. Strangers become supporters. Pain turns into purpose. And love becomes the driving force behind real, lasting change.

At its heart, Bailey's Day is about love.

Love for a boy who didn't get to grow up. Love for every family who has been blindsided by a diagnosis. Love for people you have never even met, but whose heartbreak you recognise in your own.

When you feel that kind of pain, the deep, unfair kind, you start to understand what it means to care for someone else. That's where empathy begins. When you extend that empathy to others, you give them strength. You remind them they're not alone, that someone else understands.

And I'm not the only one who sees this.

Liz Dawes, who lost her son Connor (OB 2014) to brain cancer, responded by founding the Robert Connor Dawes Foundation, so important to all of us as fellow Tonners.

Like my parents, she didn't let tragedy break her; she used it to build something. Not for herself, but for others. Liz often says that she loves what she does, but she hates why she does it, and that captures the heartbreak, purpose community built behind it all.

This kind of response, this kind of strength, only exists because of community and connection. And yet, the messages we hear today, especially as young men, often tell us the opposite.

Scroll through Instagram or TikTok and you'll see what I mean. The loudest voices, the so-called influencers, tell us that being a man means being strong, tough, and self-reliant. We're told to harden up. Push through. Win at all costs. Be the protector, the provider, the warrior. Never complain. Never cry. Never show weakness.

And yes, there's value in being strong, in staying fit, in being resilient. I'm not denying that. But none of that matters if we don't also learn how to be open, honest, and connected to others.

Because here's the truth: the cornerstone of a rich, fulfilling life is not how tough you are. It's not how many reps you can do, how much money you make, or how stoic you can act when things fall apart. It's your relationships, your connections.

The people who know you, not just the version you show online or in the locker room, but the real you. Your dreams. Your hopes. Your disappointments. Your grief. That's what matters.

Relationships, real ones, require vulnerability. They require trust. They require honesty. All the things that the loudest parts of our culture tell us to suppress.

But without vulnerability, there's no connection. And without connection, there's no community. I see this in school every single day. In the friends who check in when someone's had a rough week. I see this in the people who show up when no one's watching, not because they have to, but because they care. I see this in the quiet moments at recess or a message late at night when someone says, "Hey, how are you?"

That's what being strong looks like.

That's how Liz Dawes and my parents made it through the worst thing imaginable. Not by pretending to be fine, not by shutting everyone out, but by being vulnerable, by accepting help. And by choosing love, again and again and again.

Their grief became a spark. And that spark has lit up whole communities and networks of people who care deeply. Who show up for one another. Who know that to love is to risk loss, and to grieve is to love that it happened.

So if there's one thing I want to leave you with, it's this:

Don't be afraid to feel. Don't be afraid to care. And don't be afraid to let others in. Because strength isn't just what you carry on your own, it's who you can lean on, and who can lean on you.



And if you ever wonder what it means to be a good man, look at those who use their pain to lift others. Who build communities from compassion. Who lead, not by being the loudest in the room, but by being the most genuine, loving, and present.

That's what I learned from my parents, and that's what I learned from Bailey. And that's the kind of man I aspire to be when I am older.

Thank you.