Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

At Warwick Academy's Prize Giving Ceremony last Thursday evening, we were fortunate to have the Honorable Justice Nichole Stoneham as our guest speaker. While much of what Justice Stoneham shared about the importance of building self-confidence provoked thought, one of her most powerful statements that resonated with me, was that your mental health is sacred. Again, "Your mental health is sacred."

While I am no subject matter expert, it is safe to say that identifying stressors and finding effective coping mechanisms goes a long way in promoting mind-body wellness.

I would like to share the three most common stressors amongst teenagers like me:

School: Teenagers are often told that our school days will be some of the best days of our lives. While that may be true, according to a survey conducted by the American Psychological Association, 45%, nearly half of all teens indicated that they were stressed by school pressures. The pressure to perform well academically was the most significant, followed by the desire to please teachers. In addition, the combination of school work, extra-curricular activities and studying for exams lead to crammed schedules. Teenagers should be encouraged to reach out to their school counsellors if they feel as though they can't cope.

Parents/Family: While there is no better feeling than making your family proud, the challenge is when unrealistic expectations are set. This often leads to burnout, anxiety and low self-esteem. It's good to push yourself and set goals, but when these goals are unrealistic it can do more harm than good. How does one fix this? By lowering unrealistic expectations, allowing teenagers to accept themselves as they are, assisting them with identifying their unique strengths and encouraging them as they build on those strengths. The unconditional love and unwavering support of family is invaluable.

Peers: Not only do teenagers have a strong desire to maintain good relationships with their friend groups, we also want to be accepted and liked. Fitting in is important and we place pretty high values on our social lives. One of our main challenges, however, is that social media has many teenagers making ALL attempts to live up to an unrealistic level of "perfection". This can lead to strong feelings of inadequacy. Text messages and photos are so easily shared via social media, and depending on their nature, sometimes lead to public humiliation. Unfortunately, there are times when nothing spreads faster than "bad news". Young people are focused on the likes gained on social media, which can lead to bad choices. Teenagers are able to connect with just about anyone, and a friend is only a friend request away. Having too many fake

friends, exposes adolescents and gives them a distorted sense of self-worth. In addition, there is no privacy on social media and many are constantly trying to maintain a make believe image of themselves.

Then there is issue of bullying. Those who are bullied are at an increased risk for mental health problems such as depression. Not to mention the possible long-term damage to one's self-esteem as a result of bullying. Television shows like the Netflix series, "13 Reasons Why" illustrates this. This tv show sends a strong message about the possible consequences of bullying.

In closing, we need to change the culture of mental health and make it okay to speak about it. While negative attitudes towards those with mental health challenges are common, overcoming the stigma is a must. The good news is that we are now moving in the right direction.

I'd like to share another meaningful statement made by Justice Stoneham, "there is much beauty in life". To those who are suffering or have suffered from mental health challenges, don't be ashamed of your story. These challenges do not define you. Your strength and courage does. My poppa was a psychiatric nurse at Mid-Atlantic Wellness Institute and if he was still alive, he would endorse this message:

To be healthy as a whole, mental wellness plays a role!