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Introductory Speech for Stephanie Graf's Tennis Hall of Fame Induction



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I realize the words have yet to be invented that are large enough, colorful enough, or true enough to express the heart and soul of this woman that I love: Stephanie.

I wonder what can I possibly say to do justice to the way you've lived your life and the lives that you've changed. I began several years ago on a small chalkboard sitting in our kitchen -- a tradition that I've carried on every night -- that at the end of each day I have picked up the chalk and I've tried to express the many things you mean to me. Sometimes just a brief line, sometimes a short story, but always just the overflow from a grateful heart. And yet after these months and years of writing to you each night, I have never been at a shortage of ways to reflect the light that you've brought into my life. And now, how ironic that in these few short moments, I need to capture in words these things I so deeply appreciate in you. Maybe I can say it to you this simple way.

Not long ago we were on the road and I looked out our hotel room window from the upper floor of a very tall high-rise. I could see the rooftop of an old and beautiful cathedral. It was stunning with its carved stone and marble all done so perfectly. I could not believe the work of art I was seeing and I wondered -- how many years did it take them to create this, and what drove them to be this committed? Then I began to appreciate something greater.

I realized when this rooftop was built it was by far the tallest building. And in an age long before airplanes or skyscrapers these artists believed each day as they went about their work that no human being, no one set of eyes would ever see their creation.



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How could they not have cut one corner? How could they consider no task routine? I can only think it came from a deep place inside. The need to be true to themselves was their reason and their reward.

All of this has helped me to understand you just a little bit better: never needing applause to be at your best; only needing to give the best your soul could give to feel complete. From the roar of voices inside the lines of center court to the quietness of a child's bedroom, that generous soul, that unbending strength, that soft-spoken integrity, has not one time been shaken. The arena of tennis simply gave you a platform and an opportunity to refine those inner qualities even more.

You have always been about the action, not about the words.

You have never defined yourself by what you have achieved, rather you have achieved by how you defined yourself.¹

And even now it has taken my breath away to see that you've quietly laid down your racquet to pursue love and motherhood with the same zeal and high standards you have always demanded of yourself. No, no one has ever known you to be infatuated by your own accomplishments. In fact, as I have often said, anyone who speaks with you will most likely forget the great things you've done within thirty seconds. But they will feel cared for, their feelings engaged, and you never let go of their heart until that they know that they are completely understood.

The history books will record for posterity your ability to embrace and rise above adversity, to play through injury, and to win again, again, and again. Far in the future, people will analyze and discuss your place as the greatest of your time. And as those future generations hear of your strength and dominance, they may be tempted to think that they know you, or the real heart of a giant that beats inside of you.

But for those of us who are blessed to actually see, firsthand, your quiet humility, to watch you represent your sport with unmistakable dignity, and for those of us who are even more blessed to be lifted out of ourselves by your laughter, to be on the receiving end of your always generous heart, we have etched forever in us something a statistic could never contain: We have been touched deeply by your life; you have made us better; and we will never be the same.

Stephanie, you have spent many years of your life competing, but right here where we stand, in the ears of your children, and right now in my heart, you have no rival.

Ladies and gentlemen, I introduce to you the greatest person I've ever known: Stephanie Graff.