

Student Lasallian Commencement Address

May 1994

Presented by: Frederick E. Bryant

Members of the Board of Trustees, Distinguished Honorees, President Brother James Gaffney, Members of the Faculty, Administrators, Parents, Friends, and my Fellow Graduates:

John Baptist de la Salle created the Lasallian schools for the purpose of educating the average student and instilling within them important values for life. His goal in education was not only to turn out scholars, but more importantly, to assist people with their everyday lives.

So, I have come here to put a face on that term: "the average student". Who is the average student anyway? Is the average student, the person of 22 who has gone four years of college and is now going out into the real world? If that's the case, I am not average. This is my fifth year and I have spent a lot of time working in the real world. Many of you today don't match that description. Some of you are mothers and fathers. Many of you have one career and are now looking to another. Others are returning to school to [earn] a degree or gain a new credential. Many of the graduates who will get their diplomas today have spent a lot of years in the real world.

Who is **average**? In one way, we all are -having to work hard to obtain our degrees. I would like to share some of my thoughts of this important day to show "average" can be transformed into "special" in a place like Lewis. Those of you who know me well, know that I like telling stories. This story comes from a book given to me by Mrs. Juanita Kendall, widow of Mr. Gordon Kendall, our former Director of Protective Services and a man who seemed more a grandfather to me than a boss. For all of us he was always there to challenge, to strengthen, and to ask the right questions. So I think of the book as a gift from him with a message for all of us. The book is called The Precious Present.

In the book is a story about a small child who meets an old man whose happiness really impresses the child. The old man tells the child that the secret of his happiness is the precious present he has. The old man tells the child that the precious present can be his if he understands it. But the child really doesn't understand and guesses it to be a magic ring or buried treasure so the present eludes him. Later, when grown-up and quite unhappy, the child-turned-adult, returns to the old man and demands the secret of the precious present. The old man says that the precious present **IS** the precious present. What counts the most is **here** and **now**. What we do daily is what we become. It is what we become for others as well as ourselves. Once he understands what the secret is, he becomes a happy adult and then passes the precious present on.

What is the precious present? It is the belief that today is the most important day. Today is the day that you harvest the seeds you planted yesterday and the day you plant the seed you will harvest tomorrow. I think that Lasalle would have understood this idea. To be Lasallian is to value faith, service and community. For me, faith is about having people and beliefs shape your life. Service flows naturally from faith when you care enough to work for the needs of other people. Finally, community **happens** when we **share** with others and bring out their best.

As I share with you how people have brought the Lasallian mission to me, take time to reflect on your own experiences -someone at Lewis who has touched you and made a difference.

I, like most of you, probably have learned to live my life according to a path set by my family. I come from a wonderful extended family, but I look to my mom first. I hope to be like her: strong but gentle; committed, dedicated and willing to tell you what you need to hear.

There are others 'who have taught me in my years at Lewis. I remember Br. James who, from the first time he met me, knew my name and let me know my opinion was important. I think of several teachers: Dr. Shirley McFaul and Sr. Maria Scatena, who were the best kind of teachers, warm, kind, concerned about me as a person first and as a student second. Even after I left Education, they kept after me. **They still do!** Dr. John Greenwood, Dr. Mary Vandendorpe, Mr. Jim Houlihan, Br. Bob Murphy, Mr. Kenneth Wiggins, and Mrs. Betty Byrd, have told me not to settle for the obvious or just getting by, and have all pushed my potential.

It's not only faculty who have passed on faith, service and community to me. It has also been my fellow students, some of who are now Lewis Alumni. Mr. Rodney Williams, director of Fitzpatrick Hall, has been with me since kindergarten and Mr. Scott Singleton, who graduated last May, has made it his business to come by campus regularly to check on me. **It feels good to know that you count in people's lives.**

Because these people believed in me, I have tried to pass along the Lasallian values of faith, service and community to others. In Koinonia, our campus retreat, as a participant and leader, I learned how to share my faith. I have experienced service as a Summer Orientation Leader, as a member of Black Student Union choir, and in Student Government, where I helped to launch a new constitution which honors the truth of diversity and will serve students in their struggle for representation in the years to come. In the Black Student Union, as a member, a vice president, and finally president, I learned how important community is. It is important for all of us to work together to ensure the equal dignity of every person, to continue to overcome prejudice, and to change systems which are oppressive.

There are two other values which I think belong to the Lasallian tradition. The Black Student Union has as its motto: "In knowing thyself, choose excellence". The motto comes from a Swahili saying and it reminds me of what my mentors and the old man in the story have taught me: **to be the best person I can be.** The other value is happiness. I think it is important to be happy. I enjoy life. There are problems, yes, but you can't let them tie you down and get you overly agitated. To be **happy** is to feel **okay** with yourself and others.

Lasalle wanted his students to be happy, to be fulfilled by living in the precious present. So I leave you with the secret of the precious present: to hold on and let go at the same time. Here we are at the end of our college careers. We need to hold on to the values we have learned here, but we also need to let go of the past and live in the present. Thank you.