

Student Lasallian Commencement Address

May 2018

Presented by: Haley Renison

Good Afternoon, members of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Livingston, honored guests, faculty, staff, graduates, parents, and friends; I am honored to be speaking today.

I'll begin by describing the "glazed doughnut." This is a phenomenon I'm willing to bet those of you in the College of Arts are well acquainted with. And it is the reaction from people when you tell them about your major. Allow me to demonstrate, "Hi I'm Haley I'm studying Theology with a minor in Peace Studies." This is what follows: said person looks at you with his or her mouths slightly ajar, head tilted to the side and replies with something along the lines of, "Oh that's nice" as their eyes kind of glaze over—hence the term. Look familiar?

I have to say, despite receiving that look at least a couple hundred times in the last four years, I've remained confident in my ability to make a career out of my passions. I got into Theology, for a few reasons: the first being I realized very early on that the STEM path was not for me. I can expertly recite the mitochondria is the powerhouse of a cell but that is about the extent of my knowledge. Second, I chose to study theology because I love that it's a mixture of anthropology, history and philosophy. I love that I have the chance to examine other cultures and populations, while learning from them about their human experience. Third, theology is all about looking at the context of a situation in an attempt to understand another. Studying theology at a Lasallian university has simply been a privilege as this is an incredibly diverse, inclusive and interfaith community.

I'm going to take a minute to unpack some of my personal journey here at Lewis. On a very vulnerable note, I want to share that ever since I can remember, I have battled depression. I can't remember a time when it hasn't been deeply present in my life. It wasn't long before I discovered anxiety and ADD wanted to join the party. I was 18 when I was formally diagnosed. The thing about depression is that it presents itself in so many different forms. Depression attempts to strip you of your identity. It often leaves you in the ultimate state of disconnection, from others, and from yourself. As many of you may know, this makes it very difficult to excel, let alone function in such a demanding and stimulating environment...like college.

There were so many days where I woke up and seriously doubted my self-worth. There were so many times, where I felt like I could not possibly finish my education or achieve the prestigious goals I had set for myself. But I made it. We all have. And while I was reflecting on the last four years and the person I've become, and my trials and errors, I realized something very crucial, and it is this: I feel most whole, when I am surrounded by my community.

One of the things I love most about our Lasallian charism is our ability to form wholesome relationships with one another. During my time here at Lewis, I became very acquainted with both our local and international communities. My studies here have taken me to Rome, where I connected with student leaders from around the world to create projects that linked our universities. We spent time discussing our cultures, our student struggles and our hopes for the world.

Another joyful experience of community unfolded when I found myself, in the beautiful country of New Zealand last July. There, I attended an international Lasallian women's symposium. It was my first time traveling out of the country on my own, which was both invigorating and empowering. I spent time with women from around the globe who were unapologetically themselves. They took pride in their culture, their Lasallian roots and their unique individuality. They taught me that we should never be ashamed of who we are, and that we always have one another to rely on.

But perhaps some of us here haven't had the chance to travel to another country or experience our global network. And that's okay, because we are all perfectly capable of creating communities right where we are. A few weeks ago I found myself stranded for the night at Dulles International Airport. As I was making a bed for myself on the floor while simultaneously throwing a pity party, a couple named Robin and Ed from Oklahoma introduced themselves. They too were stranded for the night. They shared their dinner with me, and we swapped stories and photos from our trip, and within minutes, we had formed our own little community. It made a long night just a little more pleasant thanks to their kindness.

You see, humans long to connect with one another, our world craves genuine relationships. Activist Dorothy Day, said "We have all known the long loneliness and have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community." I would like to note that community can take on a variety of forms. It is a deep friendship between two people, it's a small group that you run with on the weekends, it's you and the coworkers who eat lunch together, it's all of us gathered in this field house, it's our local neighborhoods, and our international family.

Community is simply authentic human connection. And this is what I want all of us to remember as we leave here today: We are not in this alone.

We become better pilots, lawyers, doctors, scientists, artists, teachers, social workers, writers, engineers...we become better employees and better humans when we are able to pause and take the time to understand the populations we are working with. Compassion and acceptance are the powerful methods by which we can all positively contribute to the world. I sincerely believe that those of us who have made the sacrifices to obtain a higher education, have done so because we couldn't just sit idly by while there are people in the world who need our help. I think it is our responsibility to continue to educate ourselves every day because when we love what we do, are passionate about our careers and go above and beyond to make other peoples' lives better, we make this world a better place.

We are a generation who takes pride in having our voices heard, we stand up for those who don't always have the ability to speak for themselves, and we strive to make our world a more peaceful place to live. It is our duty as Lasallians, regardless of our faith, but also in light of our spiritualities, to continue to serve the greater good and our world communities. So, stay in touch. Thank your families and friends. Thank the professors who made a difference, who saw your potential and nurtured it. Thank the people who lifted you up in your darkest times and told you that you are worth something. Because you are. We all are.

Thank you and congratulations Class of 2018.