

Student Lasallian Commencement Address

May 2020

Presented by: Jan O'Hara

Good morning members of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Livingston, honored guests, faculty, staff, fellow graduates, parents, family and friends. While I wish we were all physically present with each other to celebrate our accomplishments, it is nonetheless a great honor to be speaking before all of you today.

When you drive onto campus, you will notice that in addition to the two brick walls that display our university name on the left and right side of University Parkway, there is a third wall in the middle that bears our university seal on it. On the other side of this wall, there are five words. Knowledge. Fidelity. Wisdom. Justice. Association. These are the five distinctive values that guide the University in fulfilling its Lasallian Mission. These five words are the last thing I would see every time I left campus during my four years at Lewis. Every time I went on a Wal-Mart run and every time I left to go home for the weekend, I would give that wall a quick glance as I made my way onto Route 53. And when I unexpectedly moved off campus for the final time in March, that same wall drew my attention once more, seemingly as a reminder to keep those values close to my heart in the months to come.

And what a past few months it has been. After having the last 2 months of our senior year drastically altered by the unprecedented and ongoing coronavirus pandemic, we graduated into an economic recession caused by the very same virus. Our first summer as college graduates was

marked with a historic wave of protests, discourse, and calls for justice and change in light of the killings of black men and women such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. And to round it all out, we had to endure and participate in one of the most consequential election cycles in American history. We've had our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual limits tested like never before, but I hope today serves not as a distraction from the hardship we've had to endure, but rather as a reflection and a reminder that it is important to embrace Lewis' Lasallian Mission now, more than ever, as we venture forward in this ever-changing world.

So what is Lewis' Lasallian Mission? Surely we've all heard about it to a certain extent during our time at Lewis, but what does it really mean to be Lasallian?

There are many ways to answer this question, but we can start by looking back at the 5 values I mentioned earlier: Knowledge, Fidelity, Wisdom, Justice, and Association. Those are values I constantly found present during my educational career at Lewis, and eventually learned to embrace as my own. Knowledge is at the heart of any education. My professors taught me to enjoy the pursuit of knowledge, both inside and outside the classroom, and I hope your professors instilled that same sense of discovery in you as well. Fidelity, or faith, has always been a part of my life, but thanks to both my time with University Ministry and examples set by people of incredible faith, I've learned so much about both my own relationship with God and the relationships others have with God as well. Wisdom was widespread during my time at Lewis. I've learned so much about the journey of life thanks to people I've encountered during retreats, mission trips, and even regular old classes. Justice is something that, admittedly, I did not have a solid grasp on four years ago, but today it is something that I feel compelled to fight

for. And last, but certainly not least, association and the presence of others is something that I've come to love. Whether it was in the form of a group project, a Residence Hall event, a weekend retreat, an away game road trip, or a weekly bible study, we've all had moments of association at Lewis that will have a place in our hearts.

Now, all of the previously mentioned values are important and have their own purpose in a post-Lewis life, however I think one is especially important for the times we are living through:

Association. These are undoubtedly very dark and confusing times that we currently live in. We are still fighting the coronavirus that, in the blink of an eye, changed life as we knew it 9 months ago and there has been consistent arguing and debate over how we should respond to this pandemic. Politically, it seems like we are more divided than ever. There have been waves of protests this year, over a wide range of issues from both sides of the aisle. Beliefs are being challenged left and right, and these days it seems like we're just one social media login away from witnessing a political shouting match.

There's a lot of division. There's a lot of confusion. There's a lot of anger.

And that's why, now more than ever, it is important to be in association with those around us. It means standing in solidarity with others, even if we're not directly affected by the issues that affect them. It means listening and being attentive to those whose voices aren't being heard. And it means recognizing the dignity in all our fellow human beings and showing them the love and compassion that they deserve. Life is tough already; we should all be striving to make it easier for one another and to carry each other's crosses when we can. St. Francis once said that "A

single sunbeam is enough to drive away many shadows”. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from being in association with those around me, it is that we all have this amazing ability to be that sunbeam in the lives of others, especially during these times of darkness.

For as many high points I had during my time at Lewis University, I had plenty of lows. I lost three of my grandparents. I had to watch both my mom and my dad fight separate bouts with cancer. I had countless moments where I questioned my own value and self-worth. Yet, there was always somebody there embodying that Lasallian spirit and picking me up every time I fell down. I always felt like I had someone to talk to and I never felt like I was going through my struggles alone. During my four years at Lewis, I experienced a radical form of love and togetherness from my friends, professors, peers, and mentors alike. And if you ask me, that’s what it means to be Lasallian: to have a limitless desire to love, to listen to, and to learn from those around us.

I hope that despite everything that is going on in the world right now, we can take a step back to be thankful for this moment, and to be thankful for those that helped us get here. College was a long winding road that could not have been traversed without our friends, family, and professors.

So today, let us give thanks, and let us celebrate our accomplishments. As we move forward and continue to embrace the challenges ahead, let us not forget to love, to listen to, and to learn from all those we may encounter on our path.

Class of 2020, we finally made it. Congratulations to you all on this special day!