

Student Lasallian Commencement Address  
January 2002  
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Since September 11, many of us have had our eyes opened wide and we have been compelled to see how many others really live in much of the world. For those willing to look beneath the acts of terror which initially drew our attention, the poverty and the pain of those who live in Afghanistan has broadened our awareness

In the first few days after the attack on our nation, I heard some say that we should bomb “them” back into the Stone Age. Almost as quickly, others would respond, but they are already there. Sadly, this is true for a lot of our world. If we are going to understand why others do not understand us, or appreciate us, then we are going to have to realize that we in the United States are privileged. And of all of those privileges, education is definitely among the most important.

Four and a half years ago, I arrived at Lewis University. 18 years of age, from a small town outside of Rockford, Illinois, Cherry Valley. I was nervous in those first days. A new place. Away from home. I was going to a Catholic College from a home background that was definitely not Catholic. I was also nervous about my academic program. While it seemed a good fit, it was also unusual. I wanted Aviation. Flight wouldn’t work because I have hearing problems. Administration wasn’t attractive because the idea of sitting at a desk was not inviting. So at Orientation, I signed up for my first semester classes, sixteen credit hours in Aviation Maintenance Management. I also signed up for my toolbox. I chose Craftsmen. I soon learned that I was going to major in a “guys” field. I was the only woman in my program for two years. Two years, 32 weeks a year, 40 hours a week, of maintenance and new learning.

I have done a lot of other things since getting here. I have been a Peer Minister, Director of the University Pep Band, an Orientation Leader, a Retreat Leader, and a volunteer on lots of local University Ministry Outreach programs. I have traveled on immersion experiences to Kentucky, Arkansas and Mexico. I went to help out in each of these places, but more often than not I was helped a lot more. These experiences opened my eyes to the fact that I was quite privileged. I

live an easy life compared to most of those I saw. I eat well, drink safe water, live day to day without fear of attack, have reasonable expectations that I will have a bright future. The volunteer work ended up being a really great privilege: I was privileged to help. I was privileged to learn. I was privileged to wake up to see a bigger world.

Here's a couple of those bigger world statistics: If our entire world were a single village of 100 people, seventy of them would not be able to read, only one of them would have a computer, and only one of them would earn a college degree.

In a few days I will begin working as a volunteer in Kansas City, Missouri, for the next year and a half with students in an English as a Second Language program at St. Stephen's School in a neighborhood which is primarily Latino. Did you know that in Kansas City, 75% of Latino students drop out of school before they finish high school? There are very similar statistics for those living in Illinois. In Rockford, my hometown, only 20 percent of high school graduates earn college degrees.

So those of us who are graduates here today are privileged. We have been encouraged. We have worked hard. A big part of what most of us will do today is to thank those who have supported us: our families, our friends, our faculty. Some of us have returned to finish degrees, or start degrees years after our high school graduations. Some of us are raising families right now. Some of us were done in four years, others in five, or more. Those graduating today have earned certificates of completion, bachelors in arts and sciences, in business, in nursing, and master's in many fields.

We have all benefited from the College Boom. It's true that in the U.S. many attempt to reach for their degree. But far fewer finish than we sometimes imagine. And in the rest of the world, the chance to go is often not even there.

It is not my purpose to put a damper on everyone's day, but what I want to share with you is that we now have a responsibility because of this privilege which we celebrate today. I believe that we have a responsibility to educate the uneducated. The founder of the Christian brothers, the

sponsors of Lewis University, John Baptist DeLasalle, knew that education which emphasized faith, service and community could transform the world. In France in the 17th century, DeLa Salle, a wealthy, highly educated man of privilege, chose to give up his place of privilege to educate the poor, and to teach them how to educate others. Using our education to help others is a very LaSallian thing to do. Some of us might be thinking, "I am not an education major, I can't teach." But, whether you are a teacher, a nurse, a business professional, or an Aviation Mechanic, there will always be ways to educate and encourage others. Jesus' hope was that all would have enough and there would be no more poor. We need to work toward a day when the distance between people is less and when those who have a lot naturally share with those who have little.

The most important part of being privileged is helping others. If our privilege is just for ourselves, if it is just about making money and being secure, if it ends up driving others down so we can be lifted up, then our gifts are a curse, and we waste the privilege we have received. Like LaSalle, we need to dream for, and work toward a world where all are privileged.

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