

Student Lasallian Commencement Address
January, 2001
Presented by Bill Pedersen

I have been told that typically the Lasallian Address has been given by a traditional aged student, that is, someone in their 20's. And my journey, like the journey of most non-traditional, older students, has been different from that of most traditional aged students. But, while being different, it has also been very much the same. I want to share some of this journey with you in the hope that it might speak to your own experience.

I know I can speak for all the graduates and say that we are so pleased and so honored to be here today. I join with them in thanking our families and friends for attending this ceremony and helping all of us to celebrate the occasion. We all have someone special in our lives. I am married to a lovely woman, Mary, and have a wonderful son, Zak. My mother, my brother, and my wife's family, who I now call my own, are also here. I hope they realize that their presence in my life has made the challenge of my educational experience a little bit easier. One other person here, carried in my heart, is my father. He died of cancer 4 years ago. He told me that he wanted to live long enough to see this day come, and I know he is here now, supporting me as I nervously give this address.

You know I am so happy today that I would like to thank the whole world, especially everyone here at Lewis. But today, I would like to single out the one person, above all others, who has helped to guide me, and support me for the past 7 years. Dr. John Greenwood, your words have inspired me, your knowledge and wisdom have left me in awe. I so admire the person you are. Thank you John. We all have so many people to thank: family, friends, professors and staff. Please take the time today to do just that. Open your heart to those who have opened their hearts to you.

I am finding it difficult to realize this day has come. It has yet to sink in. I guess when you put so much time and effort into completing a goal, it is somewhat like an artist completing a painting. It is difficult to recognize that the work is finished. But, it is essential that we do. No, I'll not miss the self-imposed pressures of finals, and term paper

deadlines. Nor will I miss juggling my full time job, my full time family and my full time academic program. Additionally, I'll not miss passing up the many opportunities to just have fun with friends or to even clean out the garage because my studies were the priority.

But what I will miss is the feel of Lewis. I want to and I need to carry that feeling with me always. When I drive on campus, I feel very much at peace knowing I am with others working towards similar goals. I have come to value the intellectual life. I want to stay part of that life. I would like someday to be able to pass on what I have learned in as supportive a place as Lewis.

You know, this has all come as a surprise to me. Counselors in high school, more than a few years ago, told me that I needn't bother to sign up for the senior college prep classes because I wasn't college material. I had enough self-doubts that I let their opinions determine my path. So, 25 years ago, I didn't go to college, instead I went to work. I've worked in industry running machinery, working on assembly lines, and, most recently, serving as an operations coordinator. I've sold real estate, served summons, tended bar, serviced cars, and more. And basically, I've been happy.

Eight years ago, a friend who had graduated from Lewis and was working on his MBA at Governors State asked me to go with him to pick up his textbooks. While there, I picked up a couple of books for myself. During the drive home we talked about the books I bought. In the course of that conversation, he challenged me to give college a try and assured me that he had confidence that I would succeed. Deep down I knew he was right and I also knew the value of a college education. More importantly, I knew I wanted something more. It just took the urging of a friend to help me overcome my fear. So, here I was a married, middle aged father attending University classes with mostly much younger students. Imagine what it is like for me to sit in a traditional class. I know something about how it feels to stick out, to be different and set apart! Most times I looked around the classroom and saw I was the oldest person there! When I went to the library and saw another student with a few gray hairs, I said to myself, "Look there! I am not alone!" "Another person like me!" I have learned something from feeling different, from being different. I learned not to let differences create a fear that blocks what you want to accomplish. I have learned that differences provide differing perspectives. I have

learned that differences invite me to appreciate others because they come from a different experience than my own. I have learned that the process of understanding those differences compels me to think and believe differently.

The key has been putting my heart into my experience here at Lewis. I could have come to Lewis and done only what I had to do on tests, in classes, and on papers. I chose instead to make my experience here a very personal one by opening my heart to other students, and to the faculty. I have been involved in a student organization, taken part in professional development in Psychology and Human Resource Management colloquia, and even entered the Windows writing competition. I organized study groups, met with professors during their office hours, and worked on extra credit projects. I didn't have a lot of time for these additional activities, but getting more involved pushed me out of my comfort zone. But that is what is demanded when you put your whole heart into something.

St. John Baptist de La Salle, the founder of the Christian Brothers and the inspiration for this University, started every prayer with, "Let us remember we are in the Holy Presence of God." So let us remember that God has been with us, is here with us now, and will continue to support and challenge us. La Salle said that those who believe that they stand in God's presence will act with zeal; they will give their all. God wants us to put our hearts into all that we do. How different things might be if we acted on that idea.

So rather than saying, as Lasalle did, "Let us remember that we are in the Holy Presence of God.," it might be useful to say "Let us remember that God is always in our presence." We can't walk away from a God who is always walking with us. And that God is telling us: Give it all you've got. And still more. Give it all your heart.