

Student Lasallian Commencement Address  
May, 2001  
Presented by Kate R. Woodburn

Fellow graduates, Br. James, and honored guests. I grew up in an area where I was a lot like everyone else. I had a lot in common with most of the people at my school. I went to Riverdale Grade School, Riverdale Junior High and Riverdale High School (located in three buildings on one piece of land near my hometown). There were 100 students in my high school graduating class, and about four hundred in the whole school. That number is a lot more interesting when you realize that students came by school bus from four small towns in the area. My school was in Port Byron, Illinois. I came from nearby Cordova. Port Byron was the biggest town in the area for us since it had 1200 residents. Cordova had 600. Both towns are about 150 miles straight West of Lewis along the Mississippi.

I grew up on a farm outside of town. Ours was the only house on its side of the road. The main street in Cordova, Main Street, is the only street that runs all the way through town. I can walk from one end of town to the other along this street in about 15 minutes. Along that street I'll pass mainly just houses. My town also has one church, a gas station, a park and a restaurant. At one time there were more restaurants, but they've all closed. Just in case you are thinking I lived in Mayberry, I'll remind you that we are just 15 minutes from I-80 and I-88. Fast food restaurants and grocery stores are just a short drive away. Way outside of town there's a 3M factory, a nuclear power plant and a drag strip. If you want to shop, you can, after a 30-minute drive to Moline. My dad is a farmer and an agricultural engineer at John Deere. My sister also works at Deere, as an attorney. Members of my family have been farming for nearly a century. Now my dad grows corn and soybeans. I guess you realize that I'm from around here.

I came to Lewis because it was far enough from home to feel like I was going away, because it was small enough for me to feel like I wouldn't get lost, because it had the academic program I wanted, journalism, and because I got a scholarship. I knew things would be different at Lewis, but I was surprised by the very confused looks I got when I told people that my plans for the weekend would depend on the weather. "My parents might come visit me if it rains," I would say. My friends were used to people going

somewhere if the weather was nice, but for farmers, when it rains there's less work to do. My father farms in his "spare time," and has to plan his activities depending on the season and the weather. If it's spring or fall and the ground is dry, chances are any other plans have been dropped and he's on a tractor somewhere. I got equally strange looks when I explained that I never learned how to ride a bike because, when I was young and should have been learning this skill, there was literally no where close enough for a child to ride to.

For the most part, I have felt like I fit in pretty well with my friends at Lewis. Yes, my friends joke about my background. My roommate for three years, who grew up in Elmwood Park, and went to school in Chicago, nicknamed me Katie Rebecca of Woodburn Farms, and hasn't come to visit me. She says it's because she's busy and that someday soon she'll come, but I have my suspicions that she isn't sure about being that far away from "civilization." I regularly got asked if I had my CDL, commercial driver's license, and there was no end of the things that were said about my flannel lined jeans (laugh all you want they are very very warm and comfortable.) All of this was taken as it was meant, in good fun. But, it would still occur to me that I very well might be one of the few people here who had grown up on a farm. Actually, judging from some of the comments I've heard from some people here at Lewis, I have come to realize that I might be one of the few people here who has ever even seen a farm.

This year Lewis University is celebrating diversity as part of its annual Mission theme. I have realized during my time here that this does not just concern people of different ethnicities or races, but also differences that aren't so obvious, like where you were raised. I suspect that many Lewis students secretly believe that the world ends 40 miles outside of Chicago, but I know that it doesn't. Here's another example of the differences I have experienced. This one is religious.

I was born, raised and still am a Methodist, with very strong ties to the members of my church who were almost an extended family. I grew up with these people inside and outside of church at my grandparent's house, at school, and, of course, in my own hometown. Coming to Lewis has definitely increased my knowledge, and more importantly, my experience of Catholicism. Diversity hit home every time one of my roommates seriously scolded me for eating meat on a Friday during Lent, or prayed

to St. Anthony when something was lost and had to be found, or went to the Chapel to get their foreheads smudged with ashes on Ash Wednesday. Of course, the other side of the story is that I regularly rediscovered how much our faiths were alike. We shared the same Bible, the same Jesus story, and many of the same values.

So, everyone is different and everyone is the same, even if how isn't obvious right away. If people didn't have diverse thoughts, beliefs and backgrounds there would be nothing to learn and definitely no one to teach it.

If I had gone to a college that was closer to home or at least in an area more like the one where I was raised, I would not have been exposed to people who were raised in the city and had a totally different background than mine. If I had gone to a school where there were more Methodists, or even one where religion wasn't as prominent, I would not have been exposed to this school's Catholic and Lasallian mission, the points of which I find very valid and important to any faith.

I have learned so much at Lewis from the being exposed to the many different backgrounds and beliefs of the people I've met. Those differences are what make each of us unique. Our similarities allow us to share our uniqueness and learn from each other.

For example, there is an issue in which I have recently become very interested. I know that this interest is due to where I was raised and how I was brought up. This year I've used this issue as the topic of a speech and several reports, because I want people with backgrounds unlike mine to realize that although it may not seem obvious, my issue could well affect everyone.

In the last six months I've discovered that while many students are somewhat familiar with the term "estate tax" very few understand how it will likely affect them and our nation. As a journalist, I try to pay close attention to the news. Currently the estate tax can take anywhere from 37 to 55 percent of an estate when the assets of that estate total at least \$675,000. It doesn't take long for a small business or a farm to be valued at that amount, especially when you add in land and equipment. The problem is that these taxes must be paid in cash, not land and equipment, and farmers and small business owners don't have a lot of spare cash sitting around. So, it's not hard to see why so many heirs are forced to sell so many farms and small businesses when the owners pass away. In this way, the next generation loses its livelihood. Farmlands rarely remain open fields, but

instead usually become housing developments. The loss of open land is a loss to our agricultural economy and our environment. Every time a small business closes, big business gets closer and closer to a monopoly.

Clearly, these are not positive things, but my concern goes deeper. Although the loss of small farms is apparently having little effect on what you eat and drink today. This may not last. It may not be next year, or even five years from now, but sometime in our future, there won't be enough farms. Without enough farms, there is not enough corn. No corn, no beef. No beef, no hamburgers, or steaks. Worse, without enough farms there is not enough wheat. No wheat, no bread. No bread.....well you can live without beef, but it's pretty to live without bread. And then there are cows, and milk, and cheese, and ice cream and.....I'm sure you get the point. And the world will lose things that aren't food and aren't so obvious-plastics, clean gas, and ink, each depend on corn or soy. So, the tax itself has diverse effects, and could hurt everyone. You probably wouldn't be aware of this if I hadn't shared it with you. I wouldn't have shared it with you if my interest had not been sparked. My interest would not have been sparked if I hadn't grown up on a farm. This tax, thought by most to be an enemy of mainly small farms can hurt us all. As a journalist, I hope to make the repeal of the Estate Tax one of my issues. As University graduates, we all need to ask ourselves what do we strongly care enough about to share with others.

Society's differences are valuable. Each unique individual and each unique group brings something to the whole that helps to make it what it is. You see, we are each affected by what affects even a few of us. We are even affected by things which we believe will have no affect on us. And of course, a philosophy which embraces diversity is good simply because it takes all of the different influences and experiences that we encounter to make us well rounded persons, who are each part of an interesting and balanced world. Don't be afraid of differences. Value diversity. It's how we are different that makes us complete.