

Student Lasallian Commencement Address
May, 2005
Presented by: Paul H. Sevcik

Good morning members of the Board of Trustees, Brother James, honored guests, faculty, staff, fellow graduates, parents, family and friends.

Four years ago, when I decided to come to Lewis University, I made the decision to attend just a week before classes started. Perhaps I am glad I took so long to decide for today I believe it is one of the single best decisions I have made in my life. You see, I wanted a university that had my major and a sense of community. This university offers both and so much more.

When I entered Lewis University in the Fall of 2001, I was a commuter student trying to balance my education, family, work, friends, and leisure. I soon realized that 24 hours in a day just wasn't enough to accomplish everything I set out to do, especially as each day presented another opportunity for growth that threatened to engulf me.

Perhaps St. John Baptist de la Salle experienced this feeling when he looked at the children of his time and established a school in France to teach them. De la Salle was truly a man of God and of perseverance. This one school in 17th century France soon grew to include many institutions and is today a grand network of Christian Brothers in partnership with lay peoples teaching at universities, high schools, middle schools and a variety of other educational ministries in over 80 countries worldwide. Many of us here today are blessed to be part of this wonderful network and to be graduates of this fine institution.

Lewis University is guided by the values of fidelity, justice, association, wisdom, and knowledge. In my time here, I have found that these are not just words that decorate our hallways or walls...they are integral to each effort here, whether by faculty, staff, or administrators.

Though it may seem that this is a small university, it is quite true that good things do come in small packages. The University Ministry center always seems to be abuzz with opportunities for outreach. One such opportunity is Koinonia, a student-led spiritual weekend retreat. In that one

retreat weekend, I came closer to God than I quite possibly ever have been. And because of the sense of community in the retreat, I decided to live on campus.

One February, University Ministry sponsored a social justice retreat at the Brother David Darst Center in Chicago. It was founded by former Lewis University Campus Minister and professor Brother Denis Murphy. I went on this retreat and it provided me with hands-on, real-life experience with poverty and social stratification in the city I knew so little about. I served the homeless, played with children from Honduras, took tours of the poorest neighborhoods of the Windy City's South Side, and reflected on my experiences. My eyes were opened to suffering I had never seen and my heart was moved to help.

Besides being the site of this retreat, the city of Chicago impacted my educational experience in another way. Chicago has a program named One Book, One Chicago, where the public libraries encourage people to read and discuss a specific book. The city's first selection, To Kill a Mockingbird, was accompanied by hundreds of group discussions and special events across the city. This past summer, I shared a similar experience with all of this year's entering class and hundreds of faculty. I read The Life of Pi by Yann Martel, the University's first common reader, a book that challenged my understandings and widened my educational horizons. The book tells the story of a 16-year old boy from India who is in the midst of moving to Canada with his family and the family's zoo when the boat they are on sinks in the Pacific. The boy is adrift at sea for 227 days with a hyena, a Bengal tiger, and a zebra.

While I can safely say I have never experienced such a series of events in my life, I found that the book offers an intriguing look at theology, biology, math, psychology, philosophy, and survival skills. To think that a single book could cover so many topics in as little as 400 pages is interesting, but to realize that the feelings and emotions conjured by the book have been shared by hundreds of others in this very community was quite striking. I was able to hold conversations with students, teachers, staff, and administrators who all experienced this book. It is a book I heartily recommend to all of you, no matter your interests. Through this unique learning opportunity, Lewis University allowed all of us to grow. And so, association lives in this community through the pursuit of knowledge.

As we graduate today, we must not forget lessons learned as we move into our next stage of life. I speak not just of classroom instruction, but also those experiences that helped shape our Lasallian character. I have the wonderful opportunity to serve as a Lasallian Volunteer next year, where I will live in community with Christian Brothers and serve the youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods through classroom instruction, after school programs, and weekend workshops. I know that the Lasallian movement has been a success for over 300 years, so I can expect that my experience will make a difference in the world. Not many of us take this route after college because we might not have the time, we may need to transition immediately into graduate school, or we might have a wonderful career ahead of us. And even in those futures, opportunities to help others will continue to present themselves.

I leave you with a poem:

Drop a pebble in the water: just a splash and it is gone;
But there's half-a-hundred ripples circling on and on and on,
Spreading, spreading from the center, flowing on out to the sea.
And there is no way of telling where the end is going to be.

It may be a simple poem, but as Lasallians, it is our duty to be that pebble. Make those ripples that change the world. At the office or in the hospital, at the school or in the church, at the social service agency or in another country, your simplest actions, as of yet untold, can truly make a difference. You are a hero and your future awaits you. Congratulations!