

Student Lasallian Commencement Address

December 2020

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Picture this, a deadly virus has swept across the world, forcing every country to lock down. Stores and restaurants are boarded up. McDonalds no longer serves all day breakfast. Classrooms function solely online. The only way to date is through a Zoom meeting. Toilet paper is nowhere to be found, and the only thing the nation can agree upon is that Carol Baskin killed her husband. No need to picture it, we are living in it--it's called 2020.

I would like to extend a warm, virtual welcome to the Board of Trustees, Dr. Livingston, faculty, honored guests, and all my fellow graduates. In spite of this unprecedented time, we have an opportunity to celebrate this monumental milestone of graduation. As Aristotle once said, "It is during our darkest moments that we must FOCUS to see the light." 2020--what a year of vast and overwhelming darkness. Yet, I invite everyone listening to focus on that light with me, and extend that light to the others around you.

Before I sat down to write this speech, I thought to myself, what does it truly mean to be a Lasallian. I would like to begin by reflecting upon my personal experiences here at Lewis.

In the Summer of 2016, I was incredibly excited to begin my new journey as a college student. I had committed to play my favorite sport of softball and was studying nursing in one of the most recognized schools in the state. However, the summer before I was to start at Lewis, I discovered that I would need a second ACL repair, entailing not only double knee surgery, but the reality of having to miss most of my freshman season at Lewis. The fact that I was on the team but unable to play made me feel isolated, especially freshman year when it was so crucial to prove that I deserved to be playing at the collegiate level. In addition to recovering from knee surgery my first semester, I went through an emotional break-up, experienced heavily the typical homesickness of freshman year, and lacked friends initially at Lewis. I felt very alone and disappointed in the start of my college experience, as I sat frustrated in my own little bubble.

This sadness led me to search for a purpose outside of myself, and the life I had known for so many years. I wanted to explore other interests that I had in my life, now that softball was no longer number one. This search led me to ministry. I was invited to Athlete Bible Study, a small group that had just started to intertwine faith life with athletics. I continued to make connections with people involved with ministry and started attending events such as an all campus lock-in, local community service opportunities and a week-long service trip in Tennessee. I developed genuine relationships with amazing people with hearts for service and learned from various mentors I met along the way. Through these opportunities, I found a new sense of community

and strengthened my relationship with God, even serving as a peer minister to support residents that had gone through the same struggles that I had.

Ministry wasn't the only place I experienced community, acceptance, and love here at Lewis. If your experience is anything like mine, you've always had someone in your corner. As a nursing student, I wasn't just a number. My professors knew me by name and supported me both inside and outside the classroom. I was able to study alongside a group of amazing peers who are now dedicating their lives to caring for people in their most vulnerable states, in the midst of a global pandemic. As an athlete, I experienced the bond and support between teams here at Lewis, and experienced firsthand the power of teamwork in just about any situation in life.

Because I was tremendously supported by the communities I was involved with, I gained a newfound sense of confidence. This confidence took a quiet girl that hated the idea of public speaking, to a leadership role as an RA, leader of Athlete Bible Study, and a chair member of Student Nurses Association. That same growth and confidence is what I know I can transfer into my new career as a nurse. Through these encounters I had at Lewis, God shaped me to be a person that can now give back, and help others to grow just as I did. So while my first semester at Lewis did not go as planned, I can honestly say that Lewis was exactly the place I needed to be to shape my character into what it is today.

So for me, being Lasallian means building a community that fosters individual and collective growth. It's loving God and subsequently loving others. To be Lasallian is to be the hands and feet of Christ, our light, in a broken and dark world. This is exactly what Lewis University does every day.

While my experiences highlight the beauty of Lewis, I know others have had similar experiences and discoveries; therefore, I asked three fellow graduates what their biggest take away from Lewis was....

Gabe Jones learned to keep faith and enjoy every second of life you get.

Patty Giovanetti reflected that, Lewis helped her discover the 'why' behind her choice of becoming a nurse, by using her God-given gifts to serve others.

Caroline Stephanon said that Lewis has provided her with an environment to develop inner confidence as a student athlete, and showed her what a group of unified women can achieve.

So, this virtual graduation does not involve walking across a stage and grabbing that diploma. It doesn't involve sitting shoulder to shoulder, all dressed up alongside our peers. It doesn't involve taking pictures with friends and families or throwing caps into the air at the announcement of the

class of 2020. But, graduation means so much more than that. It's the acknowledgement of four plus years of hard work, sacrifice and sleepless nights. It's the recognition of all the bonds we've made with friends, faculty, and mentors along the way. It's the celebration of the end of one chapter, and the start of another. And in all these things, we applaud intelligence, bravery, resilience, and ultimately light. Matthew 5:14-16 reminds us that, "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in Heaven."

So to the class of 2020, I extend an invitation to look around. What have we learned? What can we be grateful for? How can we help those in need in this current state of darkness and unknowns? And most importantly, in Lasallian fashion, how can we bring light to the people around us?