

LSUHSC Conferral of Degrees

GEE:

Thank you so much for the introduction. And to the faculty, parents and especially to all of you - the graduates. It is an honor for me to be here today.

For almost 100 years, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center has been changing lives, and our graduates have been changing the world.

Today's graduates represent a wide range of disciplines.

Congratulations to graduates of the schools of: Nursing, Public Health, Dentistry, Medicine, Allied Health, and Graduate Studies in Science and Philosophy

Although these fields are very different, they share important qualities that LSU has helped each of you hone -- a dedication to service and caring for others combined with the discovery of new ideas that can heal and save lives.

Ideas like those of your fellow graduates Samantha Karlin and Hunter Hopkins. While in medical school they created a student-run outreach program to deliver health education and access to health care for clients at the New Orleans Women and Children's Center.

Through their efforts, this program now serves two shelters and has over 250 volunteers from all six LSUHSC schools.

Many other graduates have made service to others not just an obligation, but a passion and priority in the work that they do.

Like Magdalena Roberts who is graduating with a degree in occupational therapy. She spent several years in the foster care system – but now says that “her adversities are battle armor to create tangible change for those experiencing similar adversity.”

Like your fellow graduate Traci Bourgeois, who before medical school was a middle and high school science teacher.

She was the first person from her family to graduate from college. Her dream was to become a doctor, something her students were aware of and encouraged her to do. She even found herself in medical school classes with several of her former students. She now hopes to give back to her community as a Family Medicine Doctor.

Your studies in the health sciences have prepared you for many scholarly and professional paths.

But, most importantly, you need to continue to bring your heart into your work.

Being a health care provider, like being a priest, rabbi or pastor carries with it a sacred trust. The magic of being a healthcare provider is that you are implicitly given the trust of the person you are caring for.

When you go to a medical office or hospital you will be like Harry Potter walking across the platform to the train for Hogwarts. Your white coat or scrubs are your magic cloak and your stethoscope or pipette your magic wand.

In other professions you have to earn that trust but if you are a nurse in scrubs, doctor in a white coat, a dentist with her tools, physical therapist with weights, or a scientist in a laboratory people will assume you are competent and know what you are doing.

The other blessing you have is knowing that each and every day—what you do matters to someone.

We just had mother's day. Sending a shout out to mother's here who are parents of graduating students, mothers who are professors and mothers who are graduating.

My own mother died twenty-five years ago of breast cancer – at the age of forty-six.

She died when I was sixteen but as she was dying—she wrote letters to me to open each year on my birthday until I turned 30. She also so wrote one for my wedding day and one for me to open if I became a mother.

My dad would carefully place each one in a FedEx envelope to arrive on my birthday. Each year she would recount her experiences at my age—and give advice.

The woman I came to know as a child and young adult, and then further through these letters, is the reason I become a physician and an advocate for women's health.

My mother had breast cancer at a time – the 1980s when people didn't talk about their cancer or their breasts.

But she did. She helped other women come to terms with their disease. She publically advocated for other women to get tested and treated, even as she was fighting her own losing battle.

As an adult learner, my mother received her doctorate in education and studied professional ethics. Her work focused on what makes people feel fulfilled in their careers.

She convinced me that to find ethical expression in my work should be one of life's foremost priorities.

In a letter she wrote me for my 20th birthday, which I opened at college four years after she died, she gave me this advice:

She said, “The major theme that kept coming back and back in my studies was that professionals wanted to find moral expression in their work.

They did not just want to be lawyers who won a lawsuit or earned a big salary, but it was critical that they understood their work as serving a strong moral purpose.

One benefit of my illness has been that I have reordered my work priorities so those projects that provide the most ethical satisfaction receive the most time and attention.

I tell you this so you will be very conscious of this important need, and will find an outlet in your professional life. It is so important because our freedom to make moral choices is central to how we define ourselves. Our ethical autonomy is the core of who we are.”

That goal to find ethical expression in my work has led me beyond the walls of my clinic or a hospital and encouraged me to be an advocate in a broader sense for health equity and health care for all people.

I became a doctor because of my mother’s experience and because of the profound impact her nurses and physicians had in our family as we battled her cancer.

They held my hand and hers—made us laugh and gave us hope. They had tremendous courage. They helped her die at home with dignity.

I turned sixteen a week before she died. During my birthday party at our house, my mom’s home health care nurse helped her put on makeup, a fancy top, and come downstairs with her oxygen tank to spend time with me and my guests.

That effort was not part of that nurse’s job description but was part of human caring.

I can think of nothing more fulfilling than the call to care.

Remember why you went into your field when days get long and you feel like you are on a hamster wheel—remember that unbridled enthusiasm you had when you chose your field.

Remember the feeling you had when you opened your letter telling you that you had been accepted to the school you are graduating from.

Remember your white coat ceremony day and the anticipation of opening that letter telling you where the next phase of your life would start.

Remember the wonder of science, the sacred of medicine.

And remember the oaths you took to care for all.

I believe that health care is a human right.

When asked whether you can see a patient at no charge—or low charge – add those clients to your patient list.

Be the healthcare professional who says “yes.”

Not only can you heal disease because of your knowledge of science and medicine,

You can help heal people.

To create spaces for conversations about quality of life – how are people doing? Or as we say in New Orleans: “How's your ma and ‘em.”

We have the unique ability and opportunity to see not just body parts but whole persons in the patients we serve.

One of the reasons I became an obstetrician/gynecologist is because I wanted the opportunity to be able to care for patients over the course of their lives —to be there for them when they were born, to watch them become teenagers, then mothers, and to care for them and their families as they aged.

As obstetricians/gynecologists, we deal with the sensitive spaces—birth, sex, reproduction, relationships.

The most healing moments of my professional life have been when I help people navigate these spaces in addition to medical decision-making. Conversations about loneliness, concerns over aging, worry over not being able to conceive a child or whether a patient should stay in an unhappy marriage have been interspersed with conversations about blood pressure, estrogen levels, and mammogram results.

The complexity of the human experience is what makes taking care of patients interesting and fulfilling.

You as health professionals along with your teams can't provide for all the needs in your patients' lives,

But in moments critical in your patients' lives, you can serve as a great support and comfort to them.

The fields graduating today represent the healthcare teams you will be a part of in your future professions – interprofessional education has changed the way you have learned during your studies and will continue to change the way you work and learn in your fields.

Remember the importance of your colleagues and don't let your ego get the better of you—especially you doctors—remember that there is nothing that you can do in healthcare without a team.

Your patient is there because someone cleaned a room. There is a call center, a receptionist, medical assistant and nurse there to help that patient get into a room to see you. All of them played a critical role in that patient's experience.

My own story recognizes the importance that these healthcare teams can provide. In 2008, my husband Allan and I were riding on a scooter on our way to visit a friend having a birthday party for her three-year-old twins.

We were hit broadside 40 mph by an SUV.

Allan lived two weeks in an ICU before we had to pull life support. I was broken everywhere. A skull fracture, paralyzed left arm, 18 broken ribs, double femur fracture and meniscus tear—and an exhaust pipe burned into my leg.

Most importantly, I was broken-hearted.

My father called me “humpty dumpty” because it would take “all the kings horses and all the kings men to put me back together again.”

The next three months I spent surrounded and supported by a healthcare team.

The orthopedic surgeon and physicians' assistant put my knee and leg back together.

During my month at a rehab hospital, my physical and occupational therapists helped me get strong.

They helped fit my wheelchair and later trained me to use crutches and to walk again.

The neurologist did my nerve conduction study which gave me hope my arm would work again.

The nurses treated my pain, made sure my bandages were changed and encouraged me to eat meals.

My primary care doctor treated my depression. All of them helped heal my heart.

Whatever path you begin after graduation - I encourage you to heal hearts—to remember the whole person despite your specialization, and to remember that you can only do this work because you work in teams.

What I've shared today is what I hope for each of you in your professions- what I believe will bring each of you success and satisfaction-

When I was young I had the good fortune to meet Nelson Mandela in South Africa shortly after he became president of a bold new nation. He has always been an inspiration to me. Mandela said, "There is no passion to be found playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living."

You all are capable of great things. I have faith in you.

No matter what each day brings you in your life and career, continue to put your heart into your work. Remember the sacred trust people have in you and take joy in how important the work that you do is to them.

You will have an opportunity because of the trust that people put in you to move from the science to the sacred...and it can be magical. If you let them—your patients will give you back much more than you will ever give to them.

Congratulations graduates!