

Watching My Son Cross the Stage

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District

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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/ed-grad-day-s5.jpg>



Sen. Vinehout writes about attending her son's graduation ceremony. She describes the lessons learned by commencement speakers and how our graduates can use their education to play roles in the communities they serve.

ST. PAUL, MN - "Can't you be a toddler again, just for a day?" the mom asked her son. I stood with other moms drinking tea. The moms shared stories about children growing up.

Children grow up so fast. When my son Nathan was a toddler, I thought the stage would never end. Now, I watch Nathan, the toddler-become-man, walk across the stage in his cap and gown.

We were in the field house at Macalester College in St. Paul. Several thousand people from all over the world were packed into the cavernous space. Despite the cold, rainy weather, the room was quite warm. The bagpipes played as five hundred students processed into the hall.

The energy was palpable. It rolled off the black-clothed young men and women in waves, infecting everyone. Folks held their cell phones high, trying to catch an image of the procession. Young ones climbed on chairs looking for a familiar face in the sea of black robes. The bagpipes lent an air of solemnity.

Mom wiped away a tear.

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The Senior Speaker, Myhana Kerr, took the stage. She was both beautiful and articulate. And, clearly loved by her classmates.

She spoke of community and its obligations. “Community requires a constant effort for its construction and maintenance.”

How often do we think of the constant effort people around us make to build community? Be thankful for those who pay attention to roads and bridges, parks and art, schools and hospitals. Everyone has a role to play in building community.

Ms. Kerr talked about how we create, discover and maintain different communities. Intentionally contribute to these communities, she told the graduates. Embrace them. Delight in their value.



I looked around the diverse crowd, and thought, clearly this college community created something much greater than “job ready” graduates. As if to reinforce my thought, a handsome African man took the stage.

“A living embodiment of the hashtag #dohardthings, you are a champion of resisting and reimagining the way things have always been done,” said the college President, as he introduced the keynote speaker, Fred Swaniker.

The man from Ghana devoted his life to answering the question, what will it take to make Africa prosper? Among many accomplishments, he created the African Leadership Academy. Through higher education, the Academy sought “nothing less than to develop 3 million ethical and entrepreneurial African leaders by 2060, and create a more prosperous and peaceful Africa.”

Approaching college with a fresh vision, the Academy focused students’ attentions on

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challenges facing Africa. Taking down the barriers between disciplines, students chose a mission of service. They asked big questions. They worked to tackle big problems like poverty, clean water, and economic development.

Students responded to the speech. They nodded, cheered and laughed. They empathized as he spoke of assumptions about Africa made by rich guys in Silicon Valley.

“A passion for service infected me,” Mr. Swaniker told the crowd. As you go into the world, bring with you a sense of mission, a higher purpose, a global perspective. Carry curiosity, humility, fairness and justice.

“Play the long game. Look out at the horizon.” Paraphrasing Bill Gates, Mr. Swaniker said, “Most people overestimate what they can do in a year and underestimate what they can do in ten years.” Look forward to what might be done in ten years.

I watched my son cross the stage with a grateful heart. I treasure so many benefits of a liberal arts education. How college ignites our curiosities. How learning invites us to ask questions and more questions. How we now see in ways we hadn’t imagined. How we love knowledge and the search for wisdom for its own sake. How we learn more skillful ways of interacting as humans.

The ceremony ended with a prayer, spoken in five languages. I share the prayer for all of us to send with our graduates as they head out into the world.

As we depart along our separate roads, may we be nourished by our years of friendship and learning. And may we draw upon them to create a more just and peaceful world, a world filled with fellowship and kinship, with respect and kindness for one another and with the hope of a better tomorrow.