

John Carroll Sophomore Class Pinning Ceremony

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Good evening students, faculty, and staff. It's such an honor to be asked to speak on this special night dedicated to establishing a new rite of passage in an institution that is steeped in tradition.

To all of the Sophomores —

First, I'd like to congratulate all of you for surviving freshman year! That is no easy feat acclimating to a new school, making new friends, trying to create balance and routines, especially in these challenging times that we're all learning to navigate together.

It's so exciting that you get to be the first class to have this ceremony. Every year, they will talk about you and in a way, you will become legendary.

Now you're almost to the halfway point of high school. Believe me when I tell you how quickly it slips by. While the days leading up to spring break seem to stretch on endlessly, and the days leading up to finals week seem to vanish in a blink, eventually, the same feels true for the years after high school. And soon, you'll be the ones looking forward to your 20-year reunion.

It won't be long before you're visiting colleges, shopping for ring dance outfits, and finally, walking across the stage to deafening applause at graduation. But your time as a Patriot will continue for the rest of your lives. And someday you'll be alumni who are reminiscing about your first Spirit Week, or sophomore year homecoming, or junior year Ring Day, or an act at JC's Got Talent that just blew everyone away.

As alumni, we all share those traditions, along with something even more valuable... a mission. And that's what the committee has asked me to speak about tonight.

You've heard this mission statement many times, but it's worth repeating so that it sinks in...

"The John Carroll School is a Catholic, co-educational, college-preparatory learning community empowering a diverse student population to attain its highest potential. Through innovative practices and curriculum, we prepare students to positively influence a global society as critical thinkers and creative problem solvers while being socially responsible, spiritually centered and morally grounded in our Catholic beliefs."

The leaders of John Carroll believe so strongly in this set of words and ideals that they made them our mission. And generations of John Carroll students have committed themselves to carrying out those words and ideals in our everyday lives, long after our last mod off.

When we break down this mission, we can start with defining John Carroll as a “learning community.” As a society and as part of the human race, we need each other to share our collective wisdom, to challenge, motivate, inspire, and support each other, so that each of us feels a sense of belonging and purpose. That is the strength of community.

When a community has people of different backgrounds, beliefs, abilities, and skills, and each person contributes their unique stories and gifts, the sum becomes greater than the individual parts. That is the beauty of diversity.

As part of the John Carroll community, we each bring different lived experiences and perspectives, but we can unite around our shared values.

The first time I ever truly thought about being part of a global society was in Mr. Garvey’s Social Justice class senior year. Beyond learning the foundations and principles of social justice, what made that course so impactful was hearing about Mr. Garvey’s time in the Peace Corps. While not every John Carroll student will necessarily join the Peace Corps, we can all still be motivated change-makers who can positively influence a global society.

Each of us has to choose the cause or causes that are most meaningful to us or seize the opportunities presented to us. Personally, I’ve focused on two specific areas: promoting health equity by addressing disparities throughout the cancer care continuum and creating a more diverse, inclusive, and accessible fashion industry for people with disabilities. One is my full-time job, the other is a passion project but I am fully and wholeheartedly committed to both causes, which are centered around ensuring that people who have been excluded are valued, represented, and treated equally.

When I was sitting in your seats, I had no idea what direction my career would go. I didn’t know what colleges I’d attend, what my majors would be, and what organizations and causes I’d dedicate so much of my time and energy to. But I did have a strong feeling that whatever I did, I wanted to make a meaningful difference.

So as you’re thinking ahead to what you’d like to study in college or possible careers, reflect on what changes you want to see in the world and how you can proactively address them.

After graduating from John Carroll, I went to Stevenson University and majored in Business Communications and Visual Communications Design, intending to work in advertising, if my professional tennis career didn’t pan out, which it didn’t. I thought that a potential way that I could make a difference would be to advocate for more positive representation of people who were typically defined by harmful stereotypes in advertising.

Then my grandmother was diagnosed with breast cancer. We were incredibly close and losing her made me realize that I wanted to dedicate my time and energy into helping to improve quality of life and survivorship for people with cancer, so that fewer families felt the immense pain of that kind of heartbreaking loss.

By then I was in graduate school at Towson University and working as a graduate assistant in marketing and event planning to pay for my tuition. I got an internship at Susan G. Komen, where I spent two years learning from and assisting an incredible mentor who was the Event Director for the Race for the Cure. I wrote my graduate school thesis about media stereotypes and representation of people with dwarfism and created a new communication theory - "Critical Stature Theory."

After I finished grad school and accepted a full-time job at Towson, a friend asked me to help coordinate a fashion show at a large conference for people with dwarfism. It sounded fun, so I said yes. Not that I had a lot of spare time because I was training for my first marathon. I'll circle back to that. The models ranged in age from 2-92 and their faces absolutely lit up as they walked a professional runway complete with lighting and music in front of an audience of over 1,000 people. I knew I wanted to give as many people as possible an opportunity to have that experience.

Then my uncle, who was another very special person in my life, was diagnosed with lung cancer that had spread to his brain. He was told that he might live for three to six months. And I quickly learned two important things - 1) lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death because it is underfunded and stigmatized, and 2) that many exciting developments in precision medicine were happening in the field of lung cancer research. Because of rapid advancements in targeted therapy and other types of precision medicine, my uncle lived for 7 years and 11 months after his lung cancer diagnosis. That wasn't enough time for those of us who loved him, but in that time, he got to be present at four of his children's graduations, two of his children's weddings, and seven more birthdays and Christmases than we thought we'd have with him.

A few months after my uncle was diagnosed, my mom found out about an organization called LUNGeivity Foundation, which is like the Susan G. Komen Foundation of lung cancer. I volunteered with LUNGeivity to coordinate a large walk at Camden Yards for two years before they offered me a full-time position. I've been there for eight years and my role has evolved in many ways but I am most excited about the community engagement work that we're doing to ensure that all people diagnosed with lung cancer have the same opportunities for best-case outcomes and access to trusted resources, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, age, socioeconomic status, or geographic location. I do not have the scientific mind to develop new treatments and precision medicines in a cancer research lab. But I do have the communication skills to be an effective advocate and the leadership skills to motivate and support a team.

I've been the Event Director for the LPA Fashion Show since 2015. That role has connected me to dozens of incredible people in the disability fashion advocacy space and led to a board position at AUF AUGENHOEHE, a Berlin-based fashion and technology company that won the Tommy Hilfiger social innovation challenge in 2019. We create ready-to-wear and made-to-measure clothing for people with dwarfism and other disabilities. The name AUF AUGENHOEHE is from a German expression that means "At Eye Level" and we're advocating

for a more inclusive, accessible fashion industry where people with disabilities are not only represented but can fully participate in the process from conception to production.

Finally, to circle back to the marathons. When I was a sophomore at John Carroll, no person with dwarfism had ever run a marathon. While I'm a pretty big optimist about most things, I never imagined that anyone with dwarfism ever would run a marathon and I definitely didn't think I would. But when I was in grad school and I heard that two people with dwarfism were running the Boston Marathon, it blew my mind and inspired me to start training. I was the first person with dwarfism to run the Chicago Marathon. I was the second person with dwarfism to run the Marine Corps Marathon because my husband beat me by 2 seconds. The point of this anecdote is that I didn't think it was possible until I knew someone else facing similar challenges had done it. So if you can be that person who inspires someone else to believe in themselves enough to set goals not limits, you will be making the world better.

So whether you end up working in research, policy, healthcare, law, business, or whatever fields you choose to pursue, find the change that is most meaningful to you and then you can truly connect your passion to a sense of purpose and back to our shared mission. And hopefully you'll have some life-changing experiences, prove to yourself that things you never even thought possible actually are, and collect some cool medals along the way.

In order to influence and drive these changes, we need to be critical thinkers and creative problem solvers. Critical thinking requires curiosity, open-mindedness, truth-seeking, some skepticism, and resourcefulness, among other dispositions. Your generation has shown that you possess all of these in your social activism and advocacy over the past few years.

Social responsibility is when one takes into consideration how their actions affect the world around them. As your generation joins the workforce, you've made it clear that you want to ensure that companies are addressing social issues like climate change, global poverty, and human rights within their business plans. These issues weren't always taught in business school, but now, thanks in large part to Millennials and Gen Z, they're part of the conversations and discussions.

These convictions reflect the true spirit of Christianity, which is one of justice, charity, and compassion. We cannot consider ourselves to be Christians without showing care and concern for our neighbors and on a broader scale, our global society.

We're inspired by our school's namesake, Archbishop John Carroll's life of service and leadership in a time of unprecedented challenges and change. He serves as an inspiring model for meaningful action to improve the lives of others. And hopefully, he'll also serve as the inspiration for Lin-Manuel Miranda's next musical.

This ceremony represents your commitment to the mission which connects us all.

My sophomore year at John Carroll, I participated in the French exchange student program. My family hosted a student in February and then I went to stay with her family in France the last few weeks of that summer. We flew home on September 7, 2001. Four days later, 9/11 happened and completely reshaped our world. It changed the global response to terrorism and brought to light troubling concerns about security, privacy, and treatment of prisoners. 9/11 altered our country's immigration policies and led to a surge in discrimination, racial profiling, and hate crimes.

You are also living through a challenging time of difficulty and injustice during your high school years. COVID disrupted everything in your lives and created serious threats to mental health. But over the past three years, you've shown us that your generation is more resilient than anyone imagined; that you're fierce advocates of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice; and that you are unrelenting champions for mental health. Having grown up in this time, you are uniquely equipped with the qualities, perspective, and motivation to eventually take on some of the world's greatest challenges.

I encourage and implore you don't wait until graduation to start carrying out our shared mission.

You don't have to solve every crisis happening in the world. But you can become more conscious of how your actions impact others and how you can be the change you wish to see in the world.

Don't wait until 15 years from now when you're in a boardroom to look around and see who isn't at the table. Start tomorrow in the cafeteria.

At my sophomore retreat, most people talked about how grateful they were for their friends. At our senior year retreat, almost everyone said they wished they'd gotten to know more people from our class before we graduated.

Life can feel so overwhelming between the news and trying to balance school, jobs, sports, extracurricular activities, and friendships, but I'll end by sharing something that Mr. Chrismer said to me my junior year at a time when I was feeling extremely overwhelmed. He said, "Cathedrals are built one brick at a time."

So today, as you celebrate this milestone of getting your John Carroll pin, remember that the education you receive during your time at John Carroll both inside and outside of the classrooms is giving you a strong foundation upon which you can carry out our mission and build your legacy one brick at a time.

Thank you.