Oxford College
of
Emory University

Commencement Address

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President Wagner, Dean Bowen, Provost Sterk, Dean Forman, members of the faculty, parents and family, but most of all justly proud members of the Oxford graduating class of 2014, WELCOME.

It is an honor for me to speak to you today as you embark on the next chapter in your lives and academic careers. I’m pleased to be here, not just as a member of the Emory faculty for many years, but as a proud parent-alum, the mother of Andy Glass (sitting and smiling here today) who graduated from Oxford College in 2011 and from Emory in Atlanta this past year.

I came to love this wonderful institution as I listened to Andy talk about his experiences here and as I watched him blossom on this campus. So, I know first-hand (as your parents cheering here surely do) what a fine school and exceptional experience Oxford is, not just in terms of academics—the solid liberal arts curriculum, wonderful professors and inspiring classes—but equally important, because of the supportive community that Oxford College deliberately creates for and with its students.

Oxford is a very special place with a distinct culture, an outstanding faculty, and a unique model of education. “Community” has always been part of the Oxford tradition. Oxford is like a very close knit family whose members care about and value each other, who get to know each other, who learn from each other, and who understand that our lives and our learning are enriched by this very supportive environment and the rich fabric of diversity among us. We are, in large part, defined by the communities we are a part of and need to connect with others in order to thrive-- in school and in life.

Oxford students are a diverse group and Oxford recognizes the value of diversity to promote excellence as well as a responsibility to foster dialogue and mutual understanding. Participation in this diverse community builds respect for others and will prepare you well for the future as the demographics of our country change and as our interactions with the rest of the world become more complex and interdependent through the commerce, technology, economics, and politics of the 21st Century.

My own experience as a student and later a faculty member at a number of different universities has been that the engagement with and support of others is critical. As an undergraduate at Barnard College—a liberal arts college with similarities to Oxford, my biology Professor Pat Farnsworth took me under her wing and introduced me to science and perhaps more importantly to life as a woman professional. She taught me that you could be smart and productive and tough in career, but remain gracious in life. In medical school at Yale, where classes were small and we developed close ties to professors, in part because of a required scholarly thesis, I developed a professional confidence because I was well supported and encouraged by my professors. During my clinical training in pediatrics at Columbia, my Department Chair Dr. Michael Katz took a special interest in me and instilled in me a rigor about learning and the obligation to
continue to learn for the benefit of sick patients. His interest in me showed me that I could be part of a dialogue with a senior professor and this made me a better trainee. I moved to Atlanta to train as a Neonatologist—in large part because I was inspired by Dr. Al Brann, the Chief of Newborn Medicine at Emory. Many people taught me the science of Medicine. Dr. Brann taught me to be a physician. A person with a keen sense of social justice and a commitment to the well-being of mothers and babies—from all walks of life and all parts of the globe—he taught me how to talk to families of sick infants and always underscored how privileged we are to care for sick patients—a message I’ve tried to pass on to trainees and young faculty.

At every stage, I was guided by people who cared about me, who took an interest in my career, who encouraged me to do more than I ever thought I could do, and most importantly who inspired me to build a career that would connect with others and have an impact. My life has been enriched by this web of connections and they gave me a confidence to go forth in the world, to become an engaged part of a community, and to tackle big challenges in hopes of making a difference.

As you each move on to the larger Emory community, the direct experience of Oxford’s small very personal community is a major advantage. It means that you know that no matter how large or impersonal your future environments may seem, there will always be people you can go to for help when you need it, for a pat on the back when you want it, and for ways to contribute to others with energy and love.

Oxford has prepared you well for the academic rigors of the College. This wonderful community has also prepared you well for the personal challenges of moving to a new environment and of starting to think about career and family and your place in the broader world. Oxford students do very well at Emory College in large part because of what they contribute to Emory College. They bring the unique perspective of this intimate community and the luxury of having developed deep connections with professors, strong bonds of friendship with peers, and engagement in the broader world.

My son is convinced that the friends he made at Oxford will be friends for life. At Oxford, he knew most of his fellow students by name. This beautiful campus was a continual source of inspiration and a manageable environment since he knew he could jump out of bed and be present in class in 5 minutes if needed. His professors took a personal interest in his well-being that continued after graduation. He grew up here to be a responsible adult, ready to take on the challenges and advantages of a large university—in part because of the confidence that comes with the support of a small and engaged college campus.

Savor the next 2 years—they will pass in the blink of an eye. Take advantage of Emory College and the richness of resources and opportunities it has to offer—with many outstanding scholars and teachers and a great diversity and depth of academic pursuits. Be intellectually curious. Take academic risks. Listen to and learn from new ideas and
new people. Use this Oxford milestone to take a moment to reflect on who you are and who you want to be. Consider your place in the broader world. As you move on, bring Oxford with you. Be conscious of Oxford’s core values, cherish the friends you’ve made here and remember that community matters.

After completing medical training, my husband and I wanted an adventure. We wanted to work in a developing country with big health challenges and decided to move to Bangladesh. This was a time when investments in global health were limited and faculty warned me that I was throwing away a promising academic career by moving to a developing country. Bangladesh was one of the poorest countries in the world, with a tremendous burden of disease and preventable mortality. We became committed to the importance of health as a human right and to the obligation for wealthy countries to invest in the future of the less developed world. When we moved to Bangladesh, neonatal and infant mortality rates were similar to what they had been in the United States a hundred years earlier; absolutely astounding. My eyes were opened to issues of child health and survival in developing countries, to the linkage between disease and poverty, and to the ability of simple low cost technologies to make a substantial difference. We joked that Bangladesh was to health and to economic development what Paris was to fashion—and we were right. Our years in Bangladesh broadened my world view. I came to understand that positive change was possible, but only through a concerted effort of a community-- of physicians, scientists, advocates, donors, policy makers and individuals. Over the past 30 years Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in improving maternal and child health-- A testament that community does matter.

You will each have many opportunities in life—some unexpected. Seize those opportunities—step out of your day to day comfort zone. Be open to the unexpected. This is the time in your life to do something different-- It may change your world and your life—as the years in Bangladesh did for us.

I want to spend a moment to address the women in this year’s graduating class. There has been a lot of discussion recently about whether woman can “have it all” and of the complexity of balancing career with family and with life. I am reminded of a lovely Chinese saying, “Women hold up half the sky.” You have the opportunity to hold up half the sky and to make meaningful contributions to your world. I never thought that I would end up in a leadership role at a major US university or as a thought leader in my field of study, but I’ve always been open to new ideas and to new challenges and to new opportunities—and others took an interest in me, inspired me, and supported me at every step of the journey. The possibilities are endless for you in a world that increasingly recognizes the special contributions that women can and do make-- a world where your male colleagues increasingly acknowledge that it is more fun and rewarding to share holding up the sky.
I was at a meeting recently where Bill Gates spoke. Through his work with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, he has transformed our world and created a future for men, women and children from some of the poorest countries in the world. He talked with great optimism about positive changes throughout the world—better education, improved nutrition, longer life expectancy, and reduced poverty. He called himself an “impatient optimist.” I hope we are all “impatient optimists” and I challenge this graduating class to be dissatisfied with the status quo, to think big, and to go out and change the world. We live in a world with transformative new technologies and new ideas that can and will change the world. Be part of that change.

Creativity belongs to the young. Remember that Microsoft and Google and Apple and Facebook were each developed by people not much older than you are today. Your Emory education will provide you with the privilege of opportunities. Find your niche, something you love, and pursue it with passion. Work beyond your comfort zone. Believe in your ability to make a great difference in our world. My wish for the class of 2014 is that you build wonderful and transformative lives. Begin your lifelong adventures today. There are many people here with you today who are smiling and looking forward to watching your futures unfold.

Congratulations Graduates! Enjoy this special moment.