

Good Evening! It is a different kind of responsibility when you are tasked with inspiring those who once inspired you. Thank you so much for the opportunity to come and speak. I'm so humbled by your willingness to listen. Graduation was one of the greatest accomplishments of my life thus far, and I have you all to thank for it, so please accept my deepest gratitude. I'm sure you're all here because of the amazing pay and benefits and all the thanks and recognition you receive, so I hope I can still bring something to the table.

As educators, you're more than just a teacher. A good teacher doesn't simply expel information; good teachers grow, lift, and shape generations, with knowledge, inspiration, and vision. This is a multi-generational culture where classrooms consist of millenials, Gen y, and Gen Xers, and even in some cases, baby Boomers and beyond. As a student, it is a privilege to be surrounded by this kind of wisdom. As an educator, I can only imagine the weight of responsibility you feel.

In a book by Parker Palmer called "The Courage to Teach" he says, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." Note that he did not say from years of schooling on how to deal with the psychology of students or immense knowledge of your subject, but identity and integrity.

My experiences at Lake Michigan College have confirmed this thought. Each of my educators were unique in their identity, but all held a common thread of integrity.

I've learned much more than simply subjects, because we are surrounded by educators who truly pour in and refuse to accept mediocrity.

Educators, not just teachers. You see, definitively, teaching is simply an act of pointing something out or instructing someone how to do something. Educating, on the other hand, requires something more. The Latin root word of educate means to lead out. As an educator, you are not only responsible for teaching information, but you are also privileged to have the opportunity to lead. Educating means to instruct someone about something morally, socially, and intellectually.

One of my favorite speakers and educators explains this idea so well. Jesus, in speaking to the masses, tells stories of a mustard seed and leavening. In His stories, the mustard seed and yeast represent faith and how a small amount can lead to greatness. In relation to education, the mustard seed represents a special kind of growth, and the leavening represents lifting or rising.

The mustard seed is very small. Almost as small as a poppyseed. But even so, it is described as pungent, powerful, fiery, irritating, and bold. Tiny, but mighty, the mustard seed, when watered and fed regularly will begin to grow a network of nutrition. It spreads and spreads its roots, making deep connections in the earth, until finally one day, it begins its ascent above ground to the tune of around nine feet.

In every classroom, there are mustard seeds--people who are full of potential success and productivity. Students who could excel at math if someone would take the time to explain it. Students, who are excellent writers, but need a little confidence to compose something great. Students, who are passionate about their field, but have no idea where to start. This is where your challenge begins.

I was a mustard seed. I arrived at my first class at Lake Michigan College as an out of breath, sweaty, terrified, 30 year old single mother with a fresh start. I sat down in the front row, as all the websites tell you to do if want to be a great student, and nervously watched the seconds tick by as I listened to the heavy breathing and awkward silence of my fellow students. I was particularly excited about this class because it was an English class, my first as a college student. I was thirsty to learn how to be a better writer, and so nervous that I wouldn't measure up. A few minutes later, an old man hobbled into the room and set his ancient briefcase on the desk.

"Oh boy... It's Ben Stein," I thought to myself.

He passed out our obligatory syllabus in silence and then, he began to speak.

He had me at "My name is William Sprunk."

An excellent speaker, the class was silent, but this time in awe. For the next several weeks, I laughed at his jokes, I delighted in his explanations, and I learned. I learned that I am an excellent writer and that it's okay for me to recognize that. He taught me to be confident, how to "read with my eyeballs," and that one can never own too many red pens. He encouraged us to read anything and everything we could, and never let us settle for anything less than he knew we were capable of. Without ever throwing around fancy titles or degrees, he earned our respect as a leader in his classroom.

Dr. Sprunk is not a teacher. He is an excellent educator.

I had three other classes my first semester, and all of them instilled in me a measure of discipline, confidence, and tenacity that would carry me through the following semesters. I would even dare to declare that those first four classes determined my success. And isn't it the same with the mustard seed? If properly cared for and fed, the plant grows deep and abiding roots, without which, the plant will not survive or be hardy.

As educators, you are not simply teaching math or science or history. You are leading students to be tenacious, determined, successful individuals with deep roots of confidence and intelligence to ignite passions and set in motion a life of integrity and great provision.

You are growing a beaten down, terrified single mother into a successful business woman. You are inspiring a first generation college student to be a catalyst for change in his family. You are growing leaders. You are growing a community.

If you've lived in the area for any amount of time, you are aware of the need for new leaders, young and old, in this community. Students who will step out of their comfort zone and begin to affect change. Students who will fight against poverty and illiteracy in their neighborhoods. Students who will ignore stereotypes and reach across bridges to fill in the gaps created by generations before them.

There are students who are thirsty for someone to come along side them and help them to rise above the negativity and oppression. It is your challenge to see beyond the tough guy attitudes, the complacent stare of the teenage girl, the shy demeanors, and the nervous sarcasm of the middle aged to reach out a hand and to help them rise up.

As educators, you are the leavening at Lake Michigan College. As you may know, it takes very little yeast to rise an entire recipe of bread, but it is a significant ingredient.

Without leavening, the bread will never rise; without educators, neither will we as students nor as a community. Leavening gives structure to the bread, it lifts the gluten and expands the loaf as it proofs and bakes.

As educators, you provide structure, knowledge, wisdom, and guidance, but are those enough? Are you inspired to affect change? Are you a catalyst in the community for growth? Do you believe that within each of your students lies an opportunity for greatness? Are you excited about the responsibility to draw that greatness out of them?

One of my favorite classes at LMC was my marketing class with Kristi LaFrenz. By the time I landed in her class, I was out of my shell, and unafraid to be in front of a room full of eyes. But she was still able to bring even more of my true self out of me. One of our first icebreakers was to share our personal motto. Mine was and still is: Choose Joy. Trust God. Be Kind. What was so interesting to me about this particular exercise was how much it made me think. Over a year later, I still think about it. It wasn't simply an exercise in getting to know one another, but almost a challenge. Once you declare your personal motto, you become a walking billboard for it. For me, it was a challenge to rise up, to do better at Choosing Joy, to be more kind, and to trust my God more fully and completely, none of which had anything whatsoever to do with marketing.

I did learn a lot about marketing in her class, and much like other educators at LMC, she was extremely complimentary of my work which fueled my confidence to continue on the days when giving up would have been so much easier. But she taught me more than marketing principles and confidence.

She allowed me and encouraged me to rise to a new level and never put a lid on the greatness she saw in her students. She drew out our identities and helped us learn to enhance them. She taught us how to be uniquely ourselves while still maintaining a professional demeanor.

There's a rumor we, as students, often hear about Community Colleges--that they aren't "real" schools. I'm here to tell you, that statement is false.

Lake Michigan College will always be a large part of my story. As a high school drop out, I wandered through life without a map, moving here, there, and everywhere. I learned plenty of life lessons the hard way, but still lacked a true education. Without this very real school, with its excellent, very real educators, I would still be lost somewhere wandering, allowing talents and gifts to go unused and eventually to expire. I am grateful that there was a place for me here to allow prestigious educators to provide a foundation of knowledge to build on, as well as a place to develop my character.

I may hold the degree, but I would challenge you, as educators, that you earned it, because we, as students, are your masterpieces and every graduation you get to see your accomplishments march across the stage. We may learn all the fancy terminology and principles. We may turn in APA style research papers, lab workbooks, and hundreds of online assignments. But what you give us in return is so much more valuable.

So thank you, on behalf of your students, for believing in us, for trusting us with your knowledge, for holding us accountable. Thank you for stretching us to be great, and for empowering us to courageously share our talents with others. Thank you for being uniquely yourselves and allowing us to do the same. Thank you for your patience, especially on those long nights when you laboriously read your 20th research paper on the controversial topic of the moment. Thank you for the laughter, for the joy, and for the precious gift of opportunity.

I will leave you with this... As you enter your classroom in just a few days and turn on the lights, recognize the space as more than just a room with chairs and tables. This space is your blank canvas, your block of clay. Michelangelo says about statues: "In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it. Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it."

As your students walk into your classroom, your blank canvas, and as book bags hit the floor, instead of busying yourself with nervously checking emails, watching the clock for that exact start time, or straightening your papers one last time, look into each set of eyes as they enter and say "Hello." Smile at them as they take their seats with the private knowledge that you are about to change their lives.