

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS at The Ursuline School Commencement

May 20, 2016

By Mrs. Eileen F. Davidson, H'12

It is my privilege and honor to welcome you, the Class of 2016 and assembled guests to the 119th commencement of the Ursuline School.

This graduating class is notable for many reasons. You have earned \$29.6 million - yes \$29.6 million - in academic scholarships, which is the largest amount of scholarship money ever awarded a graduating class in Ursuline history. You have many family connections: 12 of you are daughters of alumnae (and I ask that these alumnae moms please stand to be recognized), 50 of you have sisters who are alumnae and 30 of you have younger sisters currently attending Ursuline; 10 are nieces of alumnae and one grandmother who was a member of the Class of 1948!

We have five faculty and staff daughters graduating today and two sets of twins. This class has the greatest number of signed athletes and the largest number of National Merit scholarship awardees - one Scholar, four Finalists and 14 Commended.

I am deeply privileged to have this opportunity to share my thoughts with you, the graduates, and your families on this day of celebration. I always deeply consider what message or theme is the most timely and what will resonate with the particular graduating class. I am often influenced by a bestseller or news-worthy event. I have in the past called on David Brook's *Road to Character*, Bruni's *Where You Go Is Not Who You Will Be* and even Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*.

But this year I drew inspiration from a TED Talk. Ms. Reshma Saujani, lawyer and politician, founder of Girls Who Code, has a very interesting presentation on girls and why they don't pursue college majors in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) and careers in the field of technology. She implores us to change the mindset surrounding how girls are raised. She cites that girls are socialized to play it safe and boys are habituated to take risks.

Even as grown women, we aspire to perfection and tend to be overly cautious in our words and actions to avoid falling short of this impossible ideal. Unlike men, for example, women feel they must be able to check off every qualification box before they apply for a job while men will take a chance even if they are only partially qualified. She beseeches us to change our thinking and begin to socialize girls to be brave, not perfect. We must instill in all children but, especially girls, a conviction that failing is part of growing and that risks bring their own reward. She calls on women to appreciate and value sisterhood and to enjoy the benefits this kind of female support network can provide.

Bravery has been a recurring theme this year. Our summer read *All the Light We Cannot See* presented us with a brave, albeit fictional, character. Author Anthony Doerr's protagonist was a young blind girl named Marie-Laure. We marveled at her ability to navigate Paris by memorizing the miniature landscape model her father had created for her. For safety, she was forced to relocate during WWII. Except for a reclusive uncle, she was left to her own devices and ingenuity for survival. Without the benefit of a model, she began to navigate her surroundings by memorizing the sounds and smells of the town. She even contributed to the war efforts of the Resistance by daring to transmit news via a radio she discovered in the attic. When asked how she found the courage to be so brave, she says "it is not bravery; I have no choice. I wake up and live my life."

Illustrations of brave women are certainly not new to Ursuline students. St. Angela, the founder of the Ursulines, demonstrated remarkable courage again and again in her life. Not wanting to follow the then-established path for girls - marriage or the cloister - she set about creating another option for women of her time. She called the first group of women who followed her: "The company of women." The women who have continued her legacy these past 500 years are our own "Ursulines." These women have been models of bravery in their forward thinking, their ability to change and evolve, and their commitment to educating and empowering girls and women to reach their full potential.

Angela's own words are: "If according to times and needs you should be obliged to make fresh rules and change current things, do it with prudence and good advice."

So, Class of 2016 of The Ursuline School, you are indeed very fortunate. You have the basics that Ms. Saujani feels are essential for successful women. Not only do you have each other, a sisterhood of 165 in this amazing class of 2016 but, you now join the larger sisterhood of Ursuline alumnae some 8,000 strong. In the Ursuline tradition, you have been educated to take risks - to reach beyond your grasp; to stretch yourselves. You are one of the most academically successful classes Ursuline has had the privilege and pleasure to educate.

You have received public recognition far beyond that enjoyed by any prior graduating class. We have intentionally focused on teaching you to think - not what to think - and you responded in kind. We helped you to develop a growth mindset where fear of failure does not prevent you from seeking challenges. You have been encouraged to challenge yourself and to enjoy success even if it does not come immediately.

You have been encouraged to value progress and know the joy of achievement. You have been respected by your teachers and you have returned that respect by exceeding our expectations. You took advantage of the opportunities presented in and out of the classroom and elevated participation in all things Ursuline to new heights thus, making Ursuline better. You have toiled and discovered on your own that effort and attitude are the important indicators of success.

Don't be discouraged that, although there is a new and ever widening circle of opportunities for women, many traditional expectations will still exist. As Dr. Lisa Damour states in her book *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood*, "women's plates are full." Don't be discouraged that even when you become a biomedical engineer or astronaut or artist you will still be expected to be kind and to write thank you notes.

And so I encourage you to take risks-
professional,
educated,
intellectual risks!

I encourage you to pray and not forget St. Angela when your request is for courage.

I hope you have the opportunity often to think of one of my favorite quotes of Maya Angelou's: "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take but the moments that take our breath away."

Thank you, the Class of 2016, for doing just that for me personally and for all of us: administration, faculty and staff. You have taken our breath away by who you are and what you have been for Ursuline.

May God bless you and may you always take courage resting in the knowledge that you are loved both here and at home.