

Marquette University Commencement Address
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As prepared for delivery

Good morning. It is an absolute honor to be here with you today. It's such a privilege to be able to share in this occasion with you graduates and your families - congratulations to all of you for your achievement. And, it's a privilege to be speaking at this particular institution during this particular year. As most of you probably know, this year marks the end of Marquette's Centennial Celebration of Women - such a tribute to Marquette's leadership as the first Catholic University in the world to seat women alongside men in undergraduate courses. It also marks the 40th anniversary of Marquette's Equal Opportunity Program, which amazingly became the model for our nation's federal assistance programs enabling students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline.

We see the impact of Marquette's commitment to expanding opportunity in our work at Teach For America. You have sent 75 tremendous leaders to

Teach For America over the years - including 15 graduates in this year's class -- and I believe Teach For America is Marquette's #1 employer. Moreover, it was really only with the leadership and advocacy of your own Dean Henk and the College of Education that Teach For America has developed a presence in the Milwaukee Public Schools this year. I hope each of you feels great pride in being part of an institution that has done so much to address inequities and ensure opportunity for all. There really couldn't be a more appropriate setting for my message today.

As I stand before you, I feel extraordinarily grateful for a choice I made at my own college graduation 20 years ago - a choice to channel my energy against one of our society's most pressing problems, right away, rather than waiting to gain more experience or to make a lot of money first. I lucked into this choice without having the full benefit of what I have learned since and am excited to share these lessons to inform your paths. Whether you're passionate about the quality of the U.S. public education system or about addressing another of the world's injustices, whether you just accepted a job at Goldman Sachs or at Teach For America or are entering teaching or public service

through another path or are heading to graduate school, I hope there might be something helpful in this story.

Twenty years ago, I set out to enlist my peers - committed graduating college seniors, of all different academic majors and career interests - in a movement to improve the quality of education in our nation's urban and rural areas. At the time, the prevailing notion was that children's socioeconomic circumstances determine their educational outcomes. My senior year in college there was a hit movie called Stand and Deliver about a heroic teacher named Jaime Escalante who coached a class of students to pass the AP calculus exam. Escalante's was one of the few visible examples of what might be possible for children in low-income communities to achieve. There was little sense that his success could be widely replicated, and in fact what he achieved was so exceptional that ETS questioned the test results, creating the drama in the movie.

At the time our generation was known as the "Me Generation" - supposedly all we wanted to do was make a lot of money and lead plush lives. But I looked around and realized that the issue wasn't my

generation - it was that the only recruiters were corporations asking us to make two-year commitments to their firms. One day, spurred by my own concern about the inequities in our nation's school system, I wondered - why weren't the leaders in my generation being recruited as aggressively to make two-year commitments to teach in our highest poverty communities as we were being recruited to work on Wall Street? I thought this would make a difference for our nation's most economically disadvantaged students, and that it would shape the priorities of a generation and ultimately our nation's consciousness.

I wrote my undergraduate thesis about the idea of a national teacher corps that would do just this - and the more I thought about it, the more obsessed I became. But when I wrote a letter to the President of the United States suggesting that he start this national corps, I received a job rejection letter back. It didn't seem like the idea was going to become a reality if I didn't try to make it happen myself, but I wasn't sure that really made sense either. I spent hours and hours and hours in a quandary over what I should do. I thought maybe I should go work for one of those corporations, make some money, and gain some

experience. Ultimately, after a great deal of angst, I just decided I had to dive in and try to make this idea happen as a non-profit organization because I was convinced it had to happen. While I was nervous about it, thanks to my naivete I was pretty sure it would work - that it would get it off the ground and take off quickly. It didn't occur to me that this would become my lifelong passion - to me, the next two years were the rest of my life and I figured I'd do this for a couple of years and that would be it.

I'm glad I didn't wait to start Teach For America - because as I got deeper and deeper into this, I realized the full extent and magnitude of the problem of educational inequity and I also realized that this is a problem that is, with time, solvable. I'm so grateful that I started in early enough to have a chance to be part of its ultimate solution.

Today, twenty-one years after my own graduation, I've personally seen hundreds of teachers who are proving, just as Jaime Escalante did, that when our nation's most economically disadvantaged children are given the opportunities they deserve, they excel on an absolute scale.

Kalyn Gigot was sitting in one of your seats one year ago, as she waited for her own graduation from Marquette as a pre-med student with a double major in sociology and social welfare and justice. She joined Teach For America and was assigned to teach about 100 sixth and seventh graders math at Northwest Secondary School on the northside of Milwaukee.

Kalyn encountered classes of students who initially seemed to confirm the stereotypes of urban kids. Most of her sixth graders were performing at the level of third graders, and her seventh graders were mostly at the level of fourth and fifth graders. Her classroom was, initially, in chaos, with students doing whatever they wanted - anything but math - and not following directions.

Kalyn didn't give up on this situation. Instead she determined that her students would master grade-level standards by the end of the year and be ready to enter 7th and 8th grade on level. She went about investing her students in this goal. She shared with them that one out of ten of the students in her classroom would graduate from college unless they beat the odds and rallied them around the goal of getting on track to graduating

from college. She reached out to the students' families to enlist their support of this mission as well - she invited them to an open house to explain what it would take and how parents could support the process, and then she visited the homes of everyone (72 families) who weren't able to come. Each day she appoints a person of the day - a person who one of the students most wants to have at college or high school graduation - and lets the students share pictures or stories of these grandmothers, mothers, and mentors - as a way of making their work to succeed real and matter. She tracks students' success against the standards and creates competitions between teams to motivate students to do well.

With her students motivated to work with her, Kalyn works hard to help them find success in math and provides lots of extra supports. She plans her time well, dividing the class up into stations to allow differentiation and also making sure her students have lots of time to practice in her class. She holds office hours at McDonald's every Saturday morning and keeps about 30-40 students after school for extra help til about 7 on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays.

Now her class looks very different than it did at the beginning of the year. Her students are excited about coming to her class, and they take ownership over their work. When I talked with Kalyn over the last couple of weeks she said that she was struck recently that they had arrived at a different place when she heard them talking about area and perimeter, questioning each other's methods using the order of operations and problem-solving strategies in a respectful and productive manner. Visitors would wonder if it was the same set of students, and her students are proving they can succeed academically. They will make well over a year's progress in a year's time this year, making significant progress in catching up to grade level.

In Kalyn's example we see an incredible juxtaposition - we see on the one hand the magnitude of the problem. Our nation aspires admirably to be a place of equal opportunity but what Kalyn found in the heart of America is whole classrooms of students who are three years behind grade level! What makes this doubly outrageous though is the evidence Kalyn gives us that it doesn't have to be that way - that when children growing up below the poverty line are given the

educational opportunities they deserve, they excel. And, Kalyn shows us that the solution isn't elusive or magical. Rather, her success is about all the fundamentals of leadership - setting an ambitious vision, motivating others (kids and families) to work incredibly hard to reach that vision, taking a purposeful and relentless approach and continuously improving over time. Kalyn's example should give us all deep optimism about what is possible. It should also fuel moral outrage among all of us - because if we can solve this problem, we must.

Just as Kalyn and hundreds of other teachers are demonstrating the possibility of success at the classroom level, others are showing us what is possible at the level of whole schools. Today, there are dozens of communities with at least one and in many cases growing numbers of schools that are putting whole buildings of kids on track to graduating from college at a pace similar to that of children in much more privileged communities. Here in Milwaukee, Milwaukee College Prep is a public charter school serving 480 students, 99% of whom are African-American and more than 80% of whom receive free and reduced priced lunch. Milwaukee College Prep has reversed the achievement gap, scoring above suburban averages on statewide tests.

Just as is the case in Kalyn's experience, what is clear about the success of Milwaukee College Prep and the growing numbers of high-performing schools in low-income communities is that what accounts for its success isn't elusive. As Linnaea Thomas, a Teach For America alumna who is Milwaukee Prep's elementary dean, told me, "In a lot of ways it's not as complicated as I thought it would be." The school has a dedicated, driven leader and staff members who believe in kids, it provides kids a rigorous curriculum at the grade level above where students are supposed to be. It provides lots of extra support, with extra teachers in classrooms to help meet students' extra needs and an extended school day. Just as is the case in any high-performing institution, there is a strong focus on building a strong culture around clearly defined values.

A few weeks ago, the researchers who analyzed Milwaukee's performance on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress shared publicly that they couldn't tell from the test results that the eighth graders had been in school the four previous years. But spend a morning at Milwaukee College Prep and it becomes clear that it doesn't have to be this way.

Unlike twenty years ago, today we have hundreds of proof points in classrooms and in schools about what is possible and the prevailing notion, at least in the most elite of journalistic and policy circles, is no longer that socioeconomic circumstances are determinative of educational outcomes. The question is no longer whether it is possible to put children growing up in poverty on a level playing field, but rather how to achieve such success on a significant scale, and that is a very different question.

Even to that question, I cannot get over the growing evidence we have today that system-level change is possible. Five years ago, if we had convened the leading education philanthropists and policymakers and asked them to agree on the most entrenched and impossible to move school systems in America, I am certain that Washington, DC, New Orleans and Baltimore would have been among those five. In Washington DC, four years ago I spent lots of time trying to help convince the civic leaders in the city that they should invest in growing Teach For America; they were not persuadable because they had already invested millions of dollars in a system that hadn't changed

at all. It would be hard to describe the hopelessness in the Baltimore City Schools or in the broader community there, which went through no fewer than 8 superintendents in our first 15 years placing teachers in the system. And in New Orleans, whose educational woes were brought to life on television screens across the nation and the world in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, we would routinely meet eighth graders reading at the second grade level.

Today these are among the fastest-improving school systems in America. I spent my evening in Baltimore a couple of weeks ago listening to the system's brilliant superintendent and other education reformers in Baltimore. In this city, where the possibility of change seemed so distant even ten years ago, there are today growing numbers of schools that are putting their students on track to going to college. There is an effort to reform the way all teachers are recruited and selected, and another that has changed the way school principals are recruited and developed. There is tremendous energy and reform in Baltimore, a city where no one would have predicted this could be the case a mere decade ago, because there are growing numbers of people there who are channeling their

energy against the problem, who know that kids in our urban areas can succeed, and who understand that there is no one silver bullet in ensuring they have the opportunities they deserve, but rather that it takes all the hard work of building successful organizations anywhere -- ensuring talent at every level, building strong cultures and systems for accountability, and continuously improving. I left my evening in Baltimore a couple of weeks ago believing that if we stick with this another 20 years, we are going to be making a meaningful difference in moving the needle against a massive problem, in Baltimore and in communities around the country.

Whether at the classroom, school, and system levels, where there is transformational change for kids there is transformational leadership. Teach For America is one source of such transformational leadership - of course there are others, and there is also no doubt that Teach For America has hugely increased the number of highly successful teachers in urban and rural areas, that our alumni have fueled the growth and development of the new generation of high-performing schools in urban and rural areas, serving as high percentages of their principals and teachers and helping to pioneer the

school model in the first place, and that they are at the center of making change happen in Baltimore, New Orleans, Washington, DC, and other communities around the country where we have been channeling Teach For America corps members for twenty years now.

Twenty years ago I thought it was important to try to do something about the educational disparities in our nation, but it didn't occur to me that we could literally realize educational excellence and equity by fueling a truly unstoppable movement to ensure that all of our nation's children have the opportunities they deserve. Today, thanks to the power of time and continuous improvement and a lot of hard work, this year Teach For America will bring in more people - 4,500 corps members -- than we did in our entire first decade. And we believe we still have the opportunity to double again over the coming few years, growing a teaching corps and an alumni force that is ultimately tens of thousands strong.

I am so glad I started in when I did because there is simply so much to be done, and not only here in this country but also in other countries. In the last few years, social entrepreneurs around

the world - from India to Brazil to Lebanon to Pakistan - began bringing Teach For America's model to their countries. They are enlisting their nation's future leaders in addressing the problem of educational need that they view as their countries' most fundamental injustice. And as I see their recruits - their nations' future leaders -- bringing their energy and talents into classrooms in the slums of Mumbai and impoverished communities in Peru, I realize that if we can accelerate all our efforts by learning from each other, we will be fueling even more unstoppable movements in dozens of countries around the world by 20 years from now.

While I hope that you will all leave here determined to do your part in addressing the problems in education in our urban and rural areas, for the graduates my message is more universal. For you, I hope you will leave determined simply to take the first step to addressing one of the world's most pressing problems now, while you still have decades in front of you to come to true understanding of the problems, to find the path to actually solving them, and to achieve the depth of impact that is possible.

I was talking recently with Mark Fraley, who joined Teach For America back in 1991 and taught in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Mark was outraged that he had 17 textbooks for his 35 students, and even more outraged that he recognized that the textbook he was using for his third graders was the same dated version he had used as a third grader. He was outraged when an effort to revoke the license of a liquor store that was literally across the street from his school gained no traction. He asked himself, how can we build the political power of a neighborhood? He's been pursuing that question ever since, and today he is leading Common Ground Wisconsin, one of the largest community organizing organizations in the country, which has successfully organized low income Milwaukeeans to promote economic development and community services across the city.

Mark is deep in the midst of addressing the confluence of economic and social issues that generate the achievement gap in the first place. Talking with him gives me hope for the future of Milwaukee. With enough Mark Fraleys, we can address the unconscionable reality that in Milwaukee our children really don't have a chance at the American Dream unless they happen to be born

with the exceptional motivation to beat all odds. With enough Mark Fraleys, Kaley Gigots, and Linnaea Thomases, we can ensure the strength of our education system and of our communities and of our country.

I don't know a happier, more centered, more fulfilled group of people than the Mark Fraleys of the world, the people who are pursuing their passions, who can see their efforts making a difference, and who know that we can move the needle against the problems they're working to address in their lifetimes.

As you graduates head out to forge your paths, I wish you the luck they and I have had - to find your way to a pursuit that enables you to do work you love, with people who share your convictions, in a way that makes a fundamental difference in the world.

Congratulations, Class of 2010.