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88th Commencement Class Speaker's Address

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Kristin Griffin
Senior Class Speaker
88th Commencement
May, 2006

I have the insider knowledge to say with absolute certainty that the Class of 2006 is a special group of talented, unique, good-hearted individuals and that coming up with meaningful words to say on their behalf is an honor. We have lived everywhere from Mongolia to Cameroon, completed work in our major fields on everything from the complexities of the Kelo vs. New London case to landscape painting, and made friends who will be by our sides when wrinkles deepen and hair goes gray. You can see some of our names on book jackets or on a list of NESAC scholar-athletes or in the credits for a film. But before we become the leaders of tomorrow and the newest inductees to the “real world,” we are here on the green, where not so long ago we were freshmen playing getting to know you games, sitting amongst and looking out over the people who have made the difference for us. We are grateful.

The first time I remember feeling grateful I was in the frozen foods aisle. I was around nine and on a shopping trip with my mother. Somewhere along the way, I lost her. I remember standing in front of quarts of ice cream and berry popsicles, reaching up to hold the hand of this lady with long blonde hair like my mother, looking up at her, all smiley, and being horrified to see a face looking back at me that I did not know. In that moment, the icy air of that place seemed to pack in all around me. Seeing the curve of my mother’s back and the swish of her hair as she bent down to look at something, just a little way ahead, seemed to make my life.

It’s fitting that that moment stands out to me because we Griffins, we like to eat. Thanksgiving is quite an event at our place. Every year, things get a little bigger. The bird. The sides, stacks of little plates crowding elbows off the table. My family has grown some, too, over the years. My brother got married two years ago, and now we spend the holiday with his wife’s family, traditions mixing with the gravy on our plates.

Every year I get a little sentimental and, after the pies are set out on the table — it is very important to my mother that I mention here that they are homemade pies — I make a little resolution to myself: To make this the year that I give thanks every day. It turns out I have never had that year. Things get in the way. Routines. Deadlines. I once lost a day to a “Project Runway” marathon. That said, however many busy days have passed at Conn without my remembering my Thanksgiving resolution, I have come to realize that my past four years here have been defined by moments that challenged me to recognize how thankful I am to have chosen this place. It’s unavoidable.

First off, it’s gorgeous. Of course, it’s not all sunny days and scenic drives. Sometimes it rains in a hissing, plopping way that makes everything feel inconvenient. The month of March is a disaster, and sometimes I’m thinking more about not tripping in new shoes than what it looks like around me. But the beauty of this place has a way of sneaking up on you, and it’s then that you realize that there just isn’t any place quite like it.

There are these four trees in front of the science building that look kind of boring for a while and then, all of a sudden, bloom into bright pink fireworks. There’s a secret toadstool garden behind Lyman Allyn and, on a nice day, you can see the lighthouse blinking over the sound. Twenty minutes by car one way and you’re playing the slots at Mohegan. Twenty in the other and you’re lying out on the beach, fresh lobster roll in hand from Fred’s Shanty. Tiny black turtles sun themselves on the rocks alongside the pond in the arbo, and the green on a nice day is unforgettable.

That’s all well and good, but none of it would matter much if there weren’t amazing people around to experience it with. The students, faculty and staff who fill these spaces are remarkable, individual, sharp ... I can’t say enough good things about them. Many of us have eaten dinner with professors at their houses or babysat their kids. Many of us have found the friends who will be Auntie This or Uncle That to our own kids in a very — long — time. Many of us have been challenged by our mentors to be the best version of ourselves, and all of us are graduating today smarter, more engaged in our world and better equipped than those awkward freshmen who played name games in this exact spot four years ago. I remember racking my brain for words that began with a “k” for one such game. I was going to say something like “Hi! I’m Kristin, and I like koalas.” I was going to be peppy and fabulous, and everyone was going to want to be my friend. But when my turn came around I forgot everything. Even my name. I

had to be reminded by a friend I'd made five minutes before. Thankfully, I managed to get it together a little bit and made the friends that fill my albums and the spaces in myself that I never even knew I had. Sure, I take some of the credit for finding them and for finding the professors who have left their fingerprints all over my mind, but Conn seems to me to be about bringing smart people together and trusting each of us to make our own way. For this, and for all the other reasons that make Connecticut College the place that each of us chosen, year after year, we are grateful.

Standing in the frozen foods aisle all those years ago, seeing my mother after thinking maybe I'd lost her forever, I realize now that my gratitude wasn't just about finding her again. I think in a small, nine-year-old way, I was starting to understand that my life isn't just about me. Sure, I might have been distracted two minutes later by a Hello Kitty ice cream cake and forgot about the whole thing, but it was a start. I'm still working on it, and that's okay. I stand here today on my mother's shoulders and on the broad shoulders of my father, which is where I got them from, and on the shoulders of my brother, who would carry me forever if I needed him to. We make a kind of totem pole, and if every person who ever affected my life were carved into it, I'd be miles in the sky, a tiny figure at the top.

Back in the middle school when Ace of Base was cool and Leonardo DiCaprio was the ultimate, I got an assignment in science class to build a miniature bridge out of index cards, Elmer's glue and paper clips. I don't remember much about the final design, which isn't surprising because science is not my strong suit, but I'll never forget my teacher's advice. He used to walk around the room and look over our shoulders, watching us make a mess of our desks and hands. Every so often he would stop us from working and yell out, "Remember the triangle!" Sometimes he would draw one on the board, his fingers making each point in the air as he reminded us that it's the strongest shape.

We soon-to-be-graduates are so fortunate to have built up this kind of support for ourselves as we face something we can't quite see, and those who make that possible — our friends, our professors, our families — should know today that they have made the difference in each of our lives.