

Good Morning!

President Hartleb, Esteemed faculty and staff, officers and trustees, honored guests, family, friends and especially my fellow graduates: I am honored and truly grateful to have been asked to speak today, a celebration of **“accomplishments and new beginnings.”**

Congratulations to all of today's graduates, we have completed no small task, one that will only serve to strengthen the foundation in which we will continue to build on. To our family and friends, who have given us much support and strength, **We could not have done it without you. Thank you.**

I remember the day I was nominated to give this speech. There I was, sitting at my desk, checking my email, when I noticed one from P.A.C.E titled: Nomination for Commencement Speaker. I thought to myself, who should I nominate to give this speech and why are they asking me? So after a few minutes, I opened it up, prepared to make a decision, and it said, “We would like to nominate you!” Again I thought, why are they asking me?

It's ironic actually. In my two years here at N.E.C.C. each time I have gone to review my mid-semester grades, the teachers comments, in the class participation section all said the same thing.....”April is a bright woman, with much knowledge, it's just getting her to share it”...I thought I had them beat, **I even refused to take public speaking**, but I see they got their way.

While I know my story is a little different than all of yours, **I believe**, it is story, that in one way or another, everyone can identify with; for in it lies pain, compassion, mercy, strength and determination. As you listen today, **I urge you not to compare, but to identify** with what you hear. If you succeed in doing so, I promise you, that you will see your accomplishments today in a whole new light.

I made a lot of wrong choices in getting where I am today, but I made it. As a child I wanted everything to be fair. I believed that everyone had the same rights and that anyone could achieve their goals. I was a great mediator, and my dream was to be a lawyer. I saw people in pain, hurting, and I knew I wanted to be the voice of hope and strength for people who didn't have any left.

Through a series of events, I became one of those people without hope, and in my pain I made choices that shaped who I was and who I would become for the many years that followed. I

pushed everyone who ever loved me out of my life and when I finally realized what I had done, I continued to let fear control my life a little longer.

I finally hit the bottom, and then an amazing thing happened; ***I decided to ask for help.*** Then another amazing thing happened, an acquaintance showed me **compassion**, from that I learned **mercy and kindness**; and I began to change the person I was. I began to **re-build** my life and started reaching out to others in the same way that someone had reached out to me.

It was in doing so, and empowering someone else to make a difference in their future that I ended up here at Northern Essex Community College. It all started when I urged my boyfriend to enroll in the transition to college program, telling him that “this was his chance to return to school and fulfill his dreams.” As a result, my friend Jill challenged me to do the same. I had every excuse on why I could not, “I was a single mom of four,” “I couldn’t afford it,” “I didn’t have time,” and while she acknowledged all of those things, she knew that deep down, what was really holding me back was fear. ***So she held my hand and I enrolled in a class with her.***

I soon met my next challenge which was financial, However by then **I was not focused on the problem, only the solution**, one that was met by my brother who loaned me money for my first class, and members of my church ***who believed in me more than I believed in myself***, and so I forged on and completed that first class with newfound hope and strength.

As a first generation college student at N.E.C.C., I participated in a program known as Pathways to Academic and Career Excellence. This program, which is run by an amazing group of women, guided me through the past two years of my education. They encouraged me to try new things, provided me with information to make well informed decisions and assigned me a mentor, Dennis Spurling, who is also an alumnus of this college: ***A man who gave me a connection from life I have, to the future I want.***

At our very first meeting, Dennis said seven words to me that changed my life. He said, ***“I have no doubt you’ll succeed.”*** Those seven words, kept me going every time I wanted to give up or another hurdle came my way, because if a complete and total stranger had no doubt that I would succeed, how could I ever doubt myself? Whenever I struggled, it was those seven words that kept me looking for solutions, asking for help and moving me forward. We should all remember the power of our words.

We are ordinary people doing extraordinary things. We don't always give ourselves enough credit. Life is full of ups and downs, bumps and bruises, and quite often when we look in the mirror we don't see what the rest of the world sees. When we are in the midst of our own problems and are busy trying to just "do life," whatever that may be for each of us, we don't see how amazing, simply "doing life" can be. ***What seems like just another day to us, seems miraculous to others. You are all miraculous and amazing.***

All of this brings us back to this moment in time, Graduation day. Today, I am blessed to have my family back in my life, many of them sitting here today; they have cheered me on each step of the way, and enabled me to move forward by giving freely, so much of their precious time and making sure my children were safe while I was gone. I have an abundance of friends, **new and old**, whom I share my journey with, and my children who are my world.

While each of us had our own path that led us here, I'm certain that most of us did not travel it alone. I know that I could not have achieved what is being celebrated today without family, friends and other members of the community, who encouraged me along the way or without the tremendous support that I received from the college.

Northern Essex Community College welcomed us with open arms. They did not judge us based on our pasts, race, gender or religion. We are all equal, and we all have the same rights. This school not only welcomed us, they showed us mercy and compassion, when sometimes the odds were stacked against us. They encouraged us to keep going, and gave us strength, at times we may have wanted to give up. Instead of focusing on their advantages, they **shared** them with us, ***to teach us, guide us and provide us with an education that fit our schedules, whether it was days, evenings or online.*** They led by example, and compelled us, to reach out to others at school and in the community, whom we could help. ***What we received here at N.E.C.C. was so much more than an education.***

Yes, we studied hard, crammed for tests, didn't sleep, read more books than most librarians and stimulated the economy by keeping Dunkin Donuts in business...

YET what we got in return was a foundation, so concrete, that as we leave here today, we have the knowledge to help build and re-build lives. ***As each new challenge comes, we will rise.*** It is with this newfound courage, strength and compassion that we go out into the world and become known as the greatest graduating class in the history of 2008. Congratulations!