

Commencement Speech
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Good morning, and thank you President Glenn, members of the Board of Trustees, administrators, distinguished faculty, proud parents, family, friends and especially the esteemed graduates of the class of 2015.

Congratulations!

All of your hard work, all of your sacrifices, and all of the hours you've put in have paid off, and we're here to celebrate. So give yourselves a round of applause!

I'm honored to be here with you. As you heard earlier, I too, am a product of Northern Essex Community College and if someone had told me in 1991 that I would be standing in front of you today, well, I would have thought that they were out of their minds.

So you can imagine how shocked I was when I was asked. And why I did what anyone would do when they get big, meaningful news...

I posted it to Facebook - and I turned to 300 or so of my closest confidants for advice:

How do I express what an important role this school played in my life? I asked. How do I express how I found myself and my future here?

I met my husband in these halls.

I found my voice at the student newspaper, The Observer.

I found friends and teachers who gave me the confidence to pursue dreams that I didn't even know I had when I walked in here.

How do I thank my parents? They, like your parents, wanted a better life for me and knew education was the key. The values they taught me and my sisters made me work harder, helped me overcome obstacles and made me the person I am today. And those values have been passed to my nieces and nephew, who are now breaking their own barriers.

But what I really worried about was what advice I was supposed to come up with for such an impressive group of graduates.

What wisdom am I supposed to give people who clearly don't give up, who are military veterans, who juggle families and careers and ups and downs to pursue their educations and dreams? In preparation for today, I read amazing stories about some of you out there. And I am humbled to be with you.

As a reporter, I learned long ago in these halls, that everyone has their own story, their own path, and their own motivation. But what we all share today is the desire to achieve more. The fact that you are sitting here today is proof that you have invested in yourselves, made sacrifices and taken steps to a better future.

So here is something that you should never lose sight of:

You are the strong ones! Nothing proves that more than betting on yourselves. Nothing proves that more than sitting here today.

That message, by the way, is 127 characters long, and is how my husband suggested I give this speech. Tweet it, he said, 140 characters and a mic drop.

But while I'm a huge fan of Twitter, I need a little more than a tweet to appropriately convey all the feelings I have being here, and a few pieces of advice.

The fact that I am standing here might lead you to assume that mine was a straightforward success story. Wrong.

When I came to Northern Essex, I was lost. I'd flunked out of another college. I'd gone through a long line of jobs that went nowhere and made it crystal clear that customer service was absolutely not my calling.

I had always loved to write. I didn't know I could make a living at it, but when I came to Northern Essex I realized being a writer wasn't just something I could do, it was who I wanted to be.

I'm often asked why I became a journalist, why I'm attracted to the stories I write, about citizens who are left behind, about public officials who are out of touch, and about the never-ending search for equality and justice.

The answer is because, like perhaps some of you, I knew what it felt like to be overlooked and underestimated, because I've known and met many people in the same position, because I know what it feels like to wonder if your

voice matters, and how empowering it feels to finally realize that it does.

Your voice matters!

I want you to remember that because there may be a time when you forget, or when you feel like it doesn't.

Maybe it's when life doesn't go exactly as you planned, when you take stock of where you are at some point and think, this is not the life I pictured for myself.

That's when I want you to dig deep and keep moving forward. Trust in yourself. Trust that your hard work will bring you to a place that perhaps you never imagined but that is exactly where you need to be and what you were meant to be doing.

Your voice matters!

In a zillion years I never thought that one day I would be a newspaper columnist and that my voice would help call attention to stories of people whose voices were ignored or silenced.

But sometimes, on the very best of days, my columns have moved people to act, whether it was to stand with me and demand justice on behalf of elderly tenants left without heat or ex-offenders who were cheated out of city paychecks, or after telling the story of how my home city of New York came together in the wake of this country's most horrific attack.

I've been privileged to have a platform to share my voice at two newspapers. But the great thing about living in today's world is that everyone has an outlet for his or her voice, and

that everyone can help magnify other voices. You don't have to be a columnist to bring attention to a cause or an injustice. You have the power, and technology, in your hands to help change the world – right now.

Your voices matter!

So use them wisely, use them nobly and most importantly; use them to help others.

If you are going into the health care field, give voices to your patients. Be their advocate.

If you are going to be a teacher, give your students a voice so that they can reach their goals. Without a professor at this college, Joe

LeBlanc, helping me find my voice I would never have been able to help others find theirs.

I imagine that there may be a few of you that end up in journalism. I'm hopeful that there are and that you will help empower people - whether it's in print, online or through Twitter, Instagram, Periscope or through some other medium that hasn't been invented yet.

There is a lot of noise in the world today, but in the midst of that noise are voices that need to be heard. The undocumented young people demanding the passage of legislation that would give them legal residency in the only home many have known. The protesters who have taken to the streets of major cities across this country to push for police reform. The working poor calling for living wages. The students in failing schools pleading for their chance at a better education.

I was in Baltimore following the protests that came after the death of Freddie Gray. I covered the protest in Philadelphia that followed it, and over and over what I heard were people asking to be heard and understood and valued.

You will choose careers and paths that fit your interests and talents. But in whatever you do, the value of your lives will be measured in the difference that you make in the lives of others.

And so whether you're headed for social work or investment banking, find ways to use your gifts and your positions on behalf of others.

Don't do it because it's a nice thing to do, don't do it because I said to, do it so others can enjoy the same opportunities that you have enjoyed, so that we can all live in a world that is open and welcoming and interesting and challenging.

Graduating from Northern Essex Community College has put you on the right path, but it is up to you to continue to learn, to continue to strive, to continue to advance and most importantly, to make the world around you better.

Be fierce and fearless in that pursuit.

I know you guys are dying to go celebrate with your friends and family, but I promise I'm almost done.

I told you earlier that Northern Essex Community College gave me the opportunity to fulfill dreams I didn't even know I had before coming here.

Well, it happened again today.

I've always known how grateful I am to this school. But before I was asked to speak to you today, I didn't realize how important it was for me to come back to say thank you, to look into the faces of so many who remind me of myself and tell you how amazing you are and how proud I am to not just be among you, but to be one of you.

Congratulations, and thank you.