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Graduation Speech 2019

I want to tell you a story.

When I was six it was a privilege to go to work with my father. A master carpenter of many years, I would visit the beautiful homes nestled in the hills of Hanover or Quechee with him. I distinctly recall thinking two things about these big houses:

1. Who needs this much space, what do they do with it?
2. I want a house with stairs INSIDE

Later on, I would discover stairs inside just meant the second story but as a kindergartener this WAS COOL, this was GROUNDBREAKING, and I was going to have it too. When I told my father this he said to me “You can do whatever you want, but you need to have a plan.” The following truck rides throughout my entire childhood he painted a picture for me, it was during those truck rides that I began to understand the relationship between quality of life, income, careers, and higher education.

My plans would change. I would become a single mother to two girls before I was 23, and this presented many challenges. We lived on our own, and that meant the responsibilities of running a household and these two little lives were solely mine. The messages we hear as single young parents boil down to these two things:

1. This will be a lot harder for you now
2. You won't have time

These messages contrasted with the truth I had always known, that I can do anything I want so long as I have a plan. So I decided what it was I wanted to do, made a plan, and I made the time.

Still, hurdles existed. There were times when I had to use my short thirty-minute lunch break at a minimum wage job to run to the food shelf for us, it was the only way I could ensure we had enough provisions to last us long enough while I paid the rent. There was a time when I balanced two jobs and went to school at night. Stress and exhaustion permeated my daily life.

Other hurdles existed too. Two things were guaranteed in our house, my youngest would not like the first set of socks you brought her in the morning. Be prepared to offer two sets of socks, no strings inside and they must NEVER match. Next, my oldest would not want to be

buckled in her car seat so I could leave for work on time. I swear it was just like in those movies where the scene jumps to focus on the glaring eyes of two combatants, this was the standoff I had with my real four-year-old boss each morning. I quickly learned the sheer power of the small shining packet of gummy fruit snacks, and my mornings went a lot smoother.

The truth was I did have time, it just wasn't convenient. The truth was it was harder, but not impossible. There would be many hurdles I faced along the way - divorce, income scarcity, economic downturn, vehicle breakdowns, surgeries, career pivots, parenthood in and of itself, sock changes and the ever discouraging car seat battleground. It would take perseverance, a little bit of stubbornness and a lot more gummy snacks to get me through.

With every course I completed I leveraged my new skills to obtain a better position. By the time I was 25 I was implementing entire programs and policies for small businesses, teaching them how to better utilize software to run their operations. The closer I came to completing my degree the higher my average pay rate rose, and my children and I went from living in a two bedroom apartment to a condo with a pool to a large house on the green. Soon I wouldn't be living paycheck to paycheck. I no longer visited the food shelf but spent my Thursday evenings at the grocery store in that annoying long line like everyone else. Today, I am in the happiest and healthiest partnership of my life, the Marketing and Event Coordinator for a small Vermont business, and the owner of a sustainable events production company. The transition was gradual, but it was there in those conversations with my father, connecting the dots between quality of life, income, and higher education have never been clearer to me.

CCV has an incredibly diverse student body. The youngest graduate here today is 17, and the oldest is 76. We are single parents, and veterans reacclimating to civilian life. We are first-generation graduates. We have faced unique challenges as students, navigating both life experiences and the weave of higher education. Together, we create the colorful tapestry that is CCV. We are bound by the single silver thread of perseverance. Each and every one of us has faced the complexities of leading our lives while completing our degree. We have all heard the messages of what we cannot do and drowned out those ideas with the understanding of what we must do. What we must do for ourselves, for our children, and for the quality of life we wish to achieve. We had a plan, we knew where we were going, and we knew we could get here.

Leslie told you I called her when I was in labor with my youngest daughter. On the eve of her 7th birthday this year, I passed in my last set of finals for CCV. I took 7 years to arrive here, but it was always in my plan. If there are a few words I can leave my fellow graduates with today they are this: our achievements of tomorrow are the sum of our actions today. Remember that, our achievements of tomorrow are the sum of our actions today.

Success is not an accident, it is the result of daily hard work towards a set goal. We knew when we were six that we could do anything we wanted to do. Let today serve as evidence.
Thank you