

**Commencement Address by Alum Page Nichols (8<sup>th</sup> grade class of 2002)  
June 8, 2019**

To the Maine Coast Waldorf School Faculty and Board of Directors, friends, family, and most importantly, to the 2019 graduates... thank you for the honor of speaking to you today.

In my work I do a lot of public speaking, but it's mostly about things that I understand well like adolescent brain development and restorative justice. Offering bits of wisdom for the future leaders of the world is something I'm less familiar with...

Since Michelle Obama is busy this afternoon and had to turn down the great privilege of speaking here, I tried to sort through some of her many graduation speeches and piece together something meaningful and motivating in her words. Her messages to the youth of America are certainly inspiring, energizing, and deeply personal. In my misguided attempt to borrow from our former First Lady and offer you all some important advice for the future however, I quickly learned how deeply IMPERSONAL that would be. And so, I decided it would be best, and most honest, if I shared with you some things that *are* personal to me but will hopefully resonate with you.

Many of you know, I too am a graduate of Maine Coast Waldorf School. When I was three, my parents chose to send me here because they loved the philosophy; the emphasis on play and exploration and the deliberate, simultaneous cultivation of the three main functions of the brain: sensing, feeling, and thinking. My cubby symbol was the cherry, I was a pro at kneading kindergarten bread, and I was a fence in my first grade play so things started off really well and my parents decided it was a good fit ;) After thirteen years in the familiarity of this community, I “graduated” from eighth grade. Although a lot has changed since then (a PAVED basketball court, the name of the school and the addition of this high school program, for instance) the feeling that I have when I’m here remains the same. This community provided me with a foundation that continues to support me each day.

After Maine Coast I went on to Waynflete for high school and then headed out west for college. My life seemed to be moving along as I had planned; four years at Santa Clara University with a double major in Communication and Environmental Studies. I joined the sailing team and the outdoor club, volunteered at a VA hospital and a women and children’s shelter. Between classes, studying, clubs and volunteering I made lots of new friends and spent my weekends at music festivals and beach parties. While I didn’t totally know where I was headed, I felt fulfilled

and happy and like I was moving in a direction that felt right to me at the time. All of this was suddenly disrupted during my sophomore year when I got a phone call from my dad. My younger brother was in a car accident that had left him fighting for his life. I boarded the next flight home, not knowing then that I would never return to my life at Santa Clara.

Unsure if my brother would make it through the night I took off on redeye headed east. I remember watching the sunset over the Santa Cruz mountains as the plane flew into the night and then seeing it rise as we touched down in Boston. In retrospect I realize that this was an important symbol.

When I arrived at the hospital where my brother lay, unrecognizable and connected to life-support, I promised him that I wouldn't leave until he did and so, for the next four months, my brother's hospital room became my home.

I made the difficult decision not to return to Santa Clara but instead be with my brother while he learned to live with a traumatic brain injury that severely impacted his cognitive functions. I stayed by his side while he relearned how to chew and swallow each bite of food and put one foot in front of the other to take a step.

Meanwhile, I had put my own “plans” on pause. My choice not to return to Santa Clara left me a little lost but still, my attention was mostly on my brother. I spent my time meeting with neurologists, researching neuroplasticity, and watching Wayne’s World with him on repeat. Since there were months when he couldn’t talk, hearing my brother laugh at Wayne and Garth was comforting to me.

About a year after the accident however, I began to think about how to start moving my life forward again. The protective layer around my somewhat narrow understanding of the purpose of life had been peeled back and turned inside out and, in many ways, I was starting over but with clearer values than I had before. My brother’s strength and resilience throughout his recovery had inspired me and while I wasn’t sure exactly WHAT I wanted to do, I had a much better idea of HOW I WANTED TO FEEL doing whatever I decided to do. I had some connections in the Dominican Republic because I’d volunteered there throughout high school so in my search for meaningful work, I decided to move down there and help a friend of mine start a family planning clinic for rural, impoverished communities. I spent four months writing grants and organizing sexual health forums for women. I loved the people and the work and decided that I could definitely picture myself working in the women’s health field in developing

countries. After a few months there, I came back to Maine to organize myself before pursuing this new path that I'd discovered.

Only a couple of months after I'd returned home, I got a phone call from a teacher in Maine that I'd met in the Dominican while he was there with some of his students. He explained to me that his assistant teacher had left suddenly and that he was in urgent need of a long-term substitute. "I work with exceptionally challenging teenagers," he told me. In my mind I was thinking, *I'll listen to what he has to say, but no way, no thank you.* "Just think about it and give me a call later," he said. When I hung up the call, I had already decided that I definitely didn't want to spend 6 weeks with naughty teenagers *and* that probably wouldn't even call him back. But... Portland is super small and only a couple of hours after our phone call I RAN INTO the teacher. We grabbed a cup of coffee and chatted more about the job (I still figured I was just being courteous). I think he could tell I was pretty resistant, so he ended our conversation with, "come in on Monday and check it out, and if you decide it's not for you, I'll leave you alone, I promise."

I went to the school the following Monday. Ten years later, I'm still there.

The school is called The REAL School and it serves extremely underprivileged students in grades 6-12 whose needs have not been met in more traditional settings. School districts throughout Maine refer students to The REAL School only after they've exhausted all other resources so students arrive at our school with long histories of chronic failure in school.

Since 90% of you [graduates] told me that you all love percentages (10% of you were unable to make it to our meeting that day), here are a few that paint a picture of the students I work with: 100% of our students are facing expulsion from their sending district when they come to our school; 89% of our students receive free and reduced lunch; 38% of our students are currently homeless; 52% of our students are involved in the juvenile justice system; 91% of our students have an Adverse Childhood Experiences score of 6 or higher (showing that almost all of them have faced significant trauma – emotional, physical and sexual abuse); 100% of them need a lot of extra love and care at school and 100% of them ask for it in extremely unlovable ways. Those are only some of the statistics that describe the kids I work with.

The other day I told a group of students that I'd be speaking to you all and asked for their input. Here are a few of the responses that I got:

“Tell them that if they’re ever confused about anything, they should eat lemon merengue pie.”

“Explain to them what you know about unconditional love.”

“Teach them how to do the shiggy.”

“Tell them to find the horizon when they’re overwhelmed.”

“Ask them if they remember the 23<sup>rd</sup> number in the Fibonacci Sequence and if they do let them graduate.”

These are their exact words, by the way. So, take or leave their advice. I won’t quiz you on Fibonacci but there you go... some words of wisdom from REAL School students.

In my role as a Restorative Learning Specialist, I support students through a process that encourages a strong sense of internal control and empathy and a deep understanding of what it means to be part of a community. Our students come to us from settings where restraints and seclusions are used routinely by school staff as a response to misbehavior so their ability to self-regulate when they’re escalated is very limited. Our restorative approach to discipline asks students to take responsibility for their choices, recognize the impact of their actions on others, and repair any harm done to property, relationships, or the community.

Being a part of the REAL School Community for a third of my life has been the most inspiring, challenging, and rewarding experience for me so far. In a country that claims to be a democracy and in a structure that was designed to promote democratic values, much of our public education system seems to foster injustice and inequalities and I am proud to be a part of a public-school community that defies that standard. And I'm fortunate to be able to apply Waldorf values to my work in a public system with students who don't necessarily have the opportunity to receive a Waldorf education. I am endlessly grateful to work alongside others that understand the diverse and unique needs of children who are severely disadvantaged and often misunderstood. Every moment of my time there and all of the extra energy I put into it feels entirely worth it. Each day I learn something new and important from my students about resilience and perseverance and each day I know, at the very least, that I've been kind and supportive to a child who doesn't often get that from other adults in their life. I am inspired by the endurance of my students and the patience of my colleagues and that inspiration fills me up, day after day. My work at The REAL School gives me that feeling that I knew I needed.

Now that I've given you my mini autobiography I guess it's important for me to tell you what I've learned from all of it...

In the most painful moments in our lives it's impossible to recognize and remember the possibility of silver linings and frankly, it wouldn't even be useful at the time. When my brother lay still in a coma, or when one of my students shows up at school bruised and hungry, it's really tough to maintain the idea that things happen for a reason; that something positive can come from something so horrifying. In the moment, that sentiment feels insensitive but it is adversity that shapes us into the most authentic versions of ourselves and teaches us what we're capable of. Adversity, of course, comes in many forms. Your lives will be full of unexpected obstacles and derailments but your families and this supportive community have given you the tools for tenacity and resilience and in the challenges you'll face in the future, that foundation will hold you. I headed off to college when I was your age with an idea of what the next four years of my life would look like. That changed for me because of circumstances outside of my control but the experiences that I've had since then, and the wisdom I've gained along the way have helped me to become someone that I'm proud of.

You have all been given the incredible privilege of a Waldorf education at this, very special place. Regardless of how long you've been a part of this community, an uprooted tree in the forest will always look like an epic fairy house to you and a hailstorm will never stop you from gearing up and going outside to play. This faculty has pushed you to become creative, intelligent, and kind young adults. They've guided you to challenge norms and to always ask questions. They've pushed you to your limit academically and supported you through difficult learning experiences far beyond the classroom. They've provided you with a truly exceptional education.

Your families made the wise decision to send you here because they love you and believe in you and while I don't know most of you [parents] personally, I can say with confidence that you've all done something right because this is a smart, edgy, and deeply caring group of soon-to-be graduates. In addition to making the choice to send you to Maine Coast, I'm assuming your parents also spent many late nights and early mornings brainstorming ideas for assignments or rehearsing your lines for a play. And they've also probably slept outside on the ground (in the rain or snow) at some point, as chaperones on a school trip. They've shown up for presentations and athletic events and patiently supported you when things got really tough. They've provided you with a solid and loving foundation.

And then there's you all and the relationships you've formed with one another.

Although I don't know you all well, in our 20-minute meeting after school a couple of weeks ago it was clear to me that you have become more like family - you literally finish each other's sentences. Ever since the Moby Dick trip freshman year you've been an unshakeable team; through all the fun and all of the challenges.

The love and support that you've found in each other throughout your time here is a fundamental part of your framework and the friendships you've formed here will likely last forever as mine have.

This school and its extraordinary faculty, your loving and supportive families, and the relationships you have with one another have shaped you and provided you with the courage you need to step into the next phase of your lives with curiosity and openness... and with that privilege comes great responsibility: in many ways, you owe it to yourselves and also to humanity, to find a cause that you love (truly love) and use your foundation to help others that haven't had the same advantages.

One lesson that really helped me during my first few weeks at The REAL School was understanding my area of impact. Between substance use, abuse and neglect, mental illness, housing and food insecurity, our students have a multitude of needs and I learned quickly that I couldn't possibly meet all of their needs all the time. I

remember running into our Director's office, out of breath and overwhelmed by the this. She grabbed a paper plate and showed me [show them paper plate drawing] "this is the world and all of it's problems. Find your area of impact and make a difference there. If you get lost out here, you'll be less effective."

Clearly, there's an enormous need in the world for strong, confident, critical thinkers like all of you. What I've learned through my job and in my own research is that healthy brain development depends upon adequate nourishment of its three main functions; sensing, feeling, and thinking. Maine Coast has provided you with that in every aspect of your educational experience. Your ability to problem-solve complex issues efficiently and effectively comes from your strong intuition and your advanced critical thinking skills. You all have what it takes to make a significant, positive impact in the world!

Good luck to all of you as you enter this next exciting chapter in your lives. Trust that the hardships you face along the way will bring growth and new perspectives and the love and care from this community and your families will support you through every hurdle. Congratulations on all you've accomplished to reach this point! And in the wise words of Mick Fleetwood at a recent Fleetwood Mac show,

“Take Care of yourselves and in this extremely crazy world we seem to be living in, be so kind to one another.”

Congratulations Maine Coast class of 2019!