

Southern Utah University Student Commencement Speech

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“This is the kind of school I raised you to attend.” I stand in the kitchen alongside my parents and officially give my “yes” to Southern Utah University...by which I mean I pay my enrollment deposit. My mom’s words echo through the quiet

house, stretching into the four years that lie ahead. Four years that will show me, time and time again, that she’s right.

A few months after I chose to attend SUU, I took my first note in college. It’s a simple statement: We are all ultimately writers. Looking back, maybe writers wasn’t the right word. Storytellers. We are all ultimately storytellers. We exist in a world that does not need to be known, but we, the curious, do. That’s why we go to school. Our disciplines, whether they are from the world of business, visual arts, education, or any one of the other 140+ programs here at SUU - they help us to see the world profoundly. In turn, we’ve shared this information through reports, performances, lesson plans, or whatever your discipline asked of you. This pursuit of understanding led us here and it will lead us out into the world as graduates.

When the Class of 2022 walked under the Bell Tower in 2018, we did so amidst a remarkable summer storm. A torrential downpour, hail, thunder, lightning, wind, you name it. The band played, our parents cheered, and we watched the most transformative years of our lives come into view. It was a grand entrance to say the least. The journey we've taken over the last four years has not fallen short of that. The world has changed dramatically from the time we first walked under the Bell Tower to now. We are graduating in unprecedented times that have changed our lives on a global and individual scale. Yet here we are, persisting. We are living the hero's journey. Now, we've often heard of this trope, but I don't think many of us ever expected it to be our reality. As we journey, we find that it's not all shiny armor, ferocious dragons, and beautiful princesses. It's messy, complex, and never quite what we imagined.

For some of us, attending SUU meant moving far from home and for others it meant rediscovering their home here. Four years ago, many of us were strangers. Now, we're the reason why we can call this place home. Look around you: Can you imagine your life, or who you would be, without these people? What would your story be without them?

I did not know how to answer these questions until my story took a dramatic turn, as many of ours did, in 2020. That September I began experiencing pain in my right arm. It started as nearly nothing, but by the end of October I could not lift my arm or even feel my fingers by the end of the day. An MRI and a solemn doctor's appointment would deliver life-changing news. I had cancer. The official diagnosis downgraded "cancer" from a big "C" to a little "c." No chemo, no radiation, just surgery. A happy ending, right? A difficult one to come by, but yes. However, as we all know, stories aren't about the destination, they're about the journey.

In those weeks leading up to my official diagnosis, I lost more mobility in my arm. For four weeks I waited. It was just me and my mom and my tumor in my little apartment here in Cedar City. Those four weeks were the longest of my life. It was in this limbo that I found my life motto: You are allowed to be scared but you are always capable. Some might say that this means you dig in your heels and push through, no matter your circumstances. That's not true. It means that when we are caught in the chaos of our world falling apart, we do not have to push through as if nothing is happening. What it means is that we are capable of asking for help. Of being vulnerable. It was through acting upon this realization that I found the courage to ask for help and in response, support poured in from the community I had found here at SUU. Here I sat, a thousand miles from home, and found myself in the midst of another one.

You know what we did when I received the date of my surgery? We drove up the canyon, past the "C," until we were overlooking Kolob Terrace. Standing on the summit, looking out at Zion National Park in the distance and with Cedar City stretched out in the valley behind me, I recalled my mom's words from that night in the kitchen a few years ago: "This is the kind of school I raised you to attend."

What my mom said all those years ago is not necessarily about the buildings on campus. It's about what they contain. Southern Utah University is home to a tight-knit, welcoming, and empowering community. One with a sense of meaning that pulls us beyond ourselves to never cease learning or sharing our stories. As a freshman I thought that we tell stories because we've been there, we've conquered the mountain, we've slayed the dragon. But we don't tell stories because we know everything. We tell stories because we know so little and we are desperate to understand, to learn. We share those stories

because they bring us together, allowing us to form connections no matter where we come from or where we are going. In turn, we become one another's companions for the journey.

As this community parts ways today, know that your journey is just barely beginning. Yet look at how far we have already come. The past four years have contained some of the worst and best moments of our lives so far.

Despite the trials and challenges that have been thrown our way time and time again, we have created a community that is nothing short of exceptional. We stood together with resilience and will continue to do so long after graduation. What we have found won't disappear. We have transformed from a group of strangers who walked under the Bell Tower in pouring rain to fundamental figures in one another's lives. This community will always be here for you. As we leave here today, we step into the next chapter of our stories knowing that we may sometimes be scared, but because of the knowledge and community we have gained, and because of the people we have become: we are always, always capable.

Congratulations Class of 2022: your journey is just getting started.