

Notre Dame Academy Commencement Speech Caraid O'Brien '92

Good evening Class of 2014. My name is Caraid O'Brien, class of 1992. I am very grateful to Sister Barbara and the NDA community for the treasured opportunity to speak with you today.

As I stand before you, I feel each one of the 22 years whirling past me since I last sailed across this stage to accept my high school diploma.

I learned how to live on this stage. I learned both how to be myself and to transform into other people. I re-invented my life many times here. Like you, I was a freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, I played a brilliant playwright, an English fop, a drunken aristocrat, a baker, a mother, a child, a detective, an old woman all right here.

Our school was founded to honor the ideals and visions of one woman who invented and reinvented a string of extraordinary lives for herself. Like the Pakistani teenager, Malala Yousafzai, who has become the leading light of the Arab World for demanding education for girls, Saint Julie Billiart was a deeply spiritual revolutionary activist who dared to speak up against the religious and political tyrants of her time so that poor girls and orphans could be educated. Saint Julie founded dozens of schools for girls, both rich and poor, loved and abandoned, during one of the most oppressive and violent times in her country's history, the French Revolution. Her life was often in danger and more than once she had to be smuggled to safety. And yet like Malala, Julie had a vision for herself and for her country that she refused to relinquish under any circumstances. She had a dream to educate the poor rural girls that governments and religions had forgotten.

We, you and I and all the people in this room, are the beneficiaries of that vision. The revolution that gave us our education, that Saint Julie began in 18th century France is ongoing, and slowly making its way around the world. Today in Africa and the Middle East, girls are being kidnapped, shot and enslaved for daring to show up to school. As Nicholas Kristof asks in last Sunday's New York Times: "Why are fanatics so terrified of girls' education? Because there's no force more powerful to transform a society. The greatest threat to extremism isn't drones firing missiles, but girls reading books."

And that threat, my fellow graduates, that power to transform a society, you all have. When I graduated from NDA, the idea of one global village was talked about everywhere. As our world is collectively facing challenges we have never dealt with before, we can no longer continue shifting our problems and our pollutions from one country to another.

A hundred years ago in New York City, our ancestors, immigrant Irish, Italian, German and Jewish girls your age were forced to work in sweatshops often 14 hours, six or seven days a week to survive. After 146 of these mostly teenage girls died in the Triangle

Shirtwaist Factory Fire which is now part of New York University, the Women's Trade Union, organized strikes and reforms, demanding and receiving safer worker conditions and higher wages. Last year, a fire in a Bangladeshi factory that made clothes for Walmart and other American stores, killed 1127 workers including many young girls. The injustices of one country cannot be exported to another, injustice to women in one part of the world is an attack against women everywhere including us here at home.

As NDA graduates we are part of a global community. Our founder was French and there are 125 NDA schools around the world, including 30 in Africa, 7 in Nigeria, the very same country where 274 girls were kidnapped and enslaved by extremists last month. These are our sisters.

We have entered the millennium of the woman. We are about to have our first female president. The seeds that our great-grandmothers sewed when they won the right for us to vote only 94 years ago, are about to bloom and none to soon. In that famous picture of your classmates Madeline and Anna as Gloria Steinem and Saint Julie, the radiant beauty and infinite influence of the woman activist shines forth. We must share our privilege with the four corners of this world.

I know from speaking with Caitlin, Rebecca and Elizabeth that in addition to being stellar athletes and award winning artists, your tremendously gifted and accomplished class is already familiar with the tools of activism. Your involvement in ministry, work in Appalachia, Costa Rica, at Father Bill's and Carolina Hill is impressive. You have even been serenaded by a rock star for your good works. And as shown by your senior prank to benefit Freethegirls, your activism also has sense of humor. The world needs your activist spirit.

It is not for us to know how our actions, big or small, impact the world. What we do know is that it is all a chain reaction – kindness begets kindness begets kindness. When we lift up others who do not have the privileges and opportunities we have, we create a more diverse and inspiring world, a place we all want to live in. Could Saint Julie have envisioned the worldwide network of schools for girls founded in her name over 200 years ago? Did she know the cascading number of opportunities her dream created for girls across cultural and social divides the world over? Maybe.

What do you envision? For yourself? For the world? What kind of life will you invent? It is entirely possible that the job you desire or the organization you want to join or the book you hope to read or the music you feel like listening to or the change you want to see in the world does not yet exist and that you will have to invent it along with your life.

It took me a decade or two to fully realize that my experience at NDA was a time of fertile planting for my soul. My heart and my mind return to the lessons and the passions that I grew here, inspired by my classmates and in particular by our unforgettable and much beloved English teacher, Mrs. Doyle after whom this stage will soon be renamed.

All that I love flowered here – languages, literature, theater, performance, friendship, spiritual activism. I was truly myself while at school here and as the time for reinvention presents itself yet again, I return to the image I have of myself as a 17 year old kid on this stage and it strengthens me to fly on - just as the image of yourself receiving your college acceptances, running in the fields behind the school, chatting in the locker rooms, stringing bras up in the trees, creating sculptures in the art room, protesting the mandatory tights rule or looking at the poster in Sister Pat’s room that says – Well Behaved Women Rarely Make History, will do the same for you.

You have planted many fertile seeds already. Even if you don’t yet know what they are. When I was your age, I discovered Yiddish Literature in translation in an English class here at NDA. I started college at Boston University not knowing what I wanted to major in eventually choosing Yiddish even though it wasn’t offered at my University and a professor told me incorrectly it wasn’t a language. I spent a year living in Jerusalem where I taught Hebrew to recently immigrated Ethiopian monks who lived without electricity in stone huts on top of the Holy Sepulchre Church in the Old City. Each Saturday, I walked alone through the dusty hills of East Jerusalem to teach them. Later, I spoke in Yiddish with Nobel Laureates Elie Wiesel and Saul Bellow and the literary critic Harold Bloom. I interviewed the last generation of artists who created a legendary theatrical movement and whose work was all but forgotten, arranging for the donation of their priceless archives to Harvard and Lincoln Center. Afterward, I wrote and produced plays, translated memoirs, hosted radio shows, worked with Newark grade school students affected by gun violence, edited books and became an interfaith minister. All of these interests - writing, performing, translating, serving, began here.

I know you are nervous, I know you are afraid. I am too. That doesn’t change. If we are lucky, if we are in possession of the civil rights that so many of the women in the world do not enjoy, then every single day we wake up, our life remains unwritten. “We face that blank page. We stare out that dirty window looking for the sun” and decide for ourselves what comes next.

Our world is at a cross roads, who is going to step up to solve these issues of climate change, student debt, the misogyny of extremism? Together, let us imagine a world where health care, food and housing is a right, where women are paid equally to men, where child care and flexible scheduling allows everyone who seeks it to work, where we treat our earth as the precious finite paradise it is, where female clerics are recognized, where a safe education on par with our own is accessible to all children throughout the world. May we never forget the rights denied our sisters worldwide while we create new opportunities for ourselves and for our daughters.

Let us call into this moment the entire lineage of NDA graduates and their teachers from that first tiny Roxbury class in 1854, to the first Hingham class of 1965 to the schools founded by Julie Billiart and her patron, the writer Francoise Blin de Bourdon in France in the 1800s and around the world. Let us acknowledge the tens of thousands of young

women who carefully polished the stones along the path you are now getting ready to walk.

Let your life be your greatest creation. Whether you go into finance or science or education or the arts, your life is your painting, it is your novel, it is your play, it is your 50 foot sculpture. Imagine it, dream it, envision it like Saint Julie did hers.

And as you go now out into the world, to invent and reinvent your life, know that you are in possession of one the most feared and mighty agents of change known to humankind – “girls reading books.” You are part of a powerful chain of women in white dresses that stretches back centuries. You were born into the revolution to educate ALL the girls of the world regardless of financial, social or religious status and look how good that looks. Qu’il est Bon le Bon Dieu.

I am proud to be a part of your community and I truly look forward to watching the lives you invent for yourselves and the world you create for the girls coming up behind you. May your legacy unfold for centuries long after we here, are gone, for the benefit of all humankind. Thank you.