

Kathy Behrens
Class of 2020 Commencement Address
Salve Regina University

Thank you, President Armstrong. And thank you faculty, staff, family members and especially the graduating Class of 2020. I know you have waited a long time to have your day. It has finally arrived, congratulations.

There is no doubt that the Class of 2020, not just here at Salve, but at every college and high school where graduates missed out on special occasions like this—even the pre-K kids moving up to the Big Show—all of you have earned a special place in the history books. Indeed, if the Book of Job were written today, it would probably be called “The Class of 2020.” You had a global pandemic, the worst economic crisis in a generation, social unrest, social distancing, mandatory masks and unsettling shortages of human interaction ... and, occasionally, toilet paper.

But for all you have endured, there have been bright spots: We learned to trust science. People across the world marched for racial justice. More Americans voted in a presidential election than at any other time in our nation’s history. We learned to truly appreciate health care heroes and frontline workers. Some of us learned to bake and some of us mastered the art of ordering in. But all of us have been through the most unforgettable year of our lives and you, the graduating Class of 2020, have much to be grateful for even if it didn’t go how you planned or hoped.

Now, I know there are some who use the occasion of the Commencement address to encourage graduates to be fearless, to have an urgency to change the world and that can be good advice.

But I want to encourage you to also be patient; especially with yourself. Your life will take many twists and turns, jobs won’t work out, relationships will come and go, friendships will change and your desire to have it all, in that very place you are in, may cause you to miss out on wonderful small moments that can bring you great joy. Slow down.

Know that there is no straight path from here to your life’s goals. Be present, treasure your time with friends and family, take care of yourself, give back to your community, laugh a lot, and don’t be afraid to make mistakes or take some risks, it’s how you will learn and grow. And never forget that it’s not all hard work, skill, and connections that create success. Luck will play a big part in your life as well, and you must keep your eyes open to the opportunities it brings with it, even if it leads you away from your scripted path.

I can say with great certainty that at this point in my life, as hard as I have worked, I have also been luckier than most. I graduated from the University of Hartford with a Bachelor of Science in special education. Having spent my college summers working at a school for special needs kids, I was sure that was what I wanted to do with my life and career, but the closer I got to graduation and the more involved I got in student government and the real world of politics, the more I was convinced that my passions lay elsewhere. The

Commencement speaker at my graduation was the congresswoman from Connecticut, Barbara Kenneally. Lucky for me, as president of the student government, I had the opportunity to join the congresswoman and other dignitaries for lunch. I told her that I wanted to get into politics, not running for office myself, but working for a candidate that I truly believed in. Her advice to me that day was, "go learn how to raise money." Not exactly what I was expecting.

So, I had a degree that I was grateful for and proud of and which my parents spent a lot of money on, but it would not technically be used for one day of my career.

I followed the congresswoman's advice and got a job working as a fundraiser for the United Way in New York City, which then led directly to the first of many dream jobs when I was hired to work in the administration of the former governor of New York, Mario Cuomo. It was the honor of my life to work with and for a public servant like him, and I did it for seven extraordinary years. After that I ran a nonprofit organization and I have now had what has been a really fun, really challenging, pretty incredible, 20-year run at the NBA.

That was not in my original plan and I am still sometimes not sure how it all came together, but it has. I know that many of you have started on your own career path and maybe you have a clear vision of what is ahead for you. Many others of you, perhaps most of you, have taken tentative first steps, but you aren't sure that they're the right steps and you don't know exactly where you want them to lead. Trust me when I tell you, that is ok. Remember, there is no straight path, so venture forth with confidence that you will find your way and maybe one day you will remember your Commencement speaker the way I remember mine.

Finally, this day is also a chance for you to thank those who have helped you get to this point, the people whose support and inspiration have made your journey possible. When I think of that person in my life, I think most often of my grandmother. She was born in Ireland in 1908. Poverty forced her to leave her parents and two of her siblings. With many others she was bound for America and what she hoped would be a better life. She set sail on the Megantic, a ship that brought Alice McIntyre from Ireland, to Nova Scotia, and then on to Montreal. She crossed into the United States through a small border town in upstate New York and made her way to the Bronx. My grandmother was 17 years old, around the same age many of you were when you started here.

She later met and married my grandfather and they had six daughters. She loved her family and her faith, and she grew to love America, but she never forgot her home. For you, Salve Regina has been home as well, a place that has sheltered and nurtured you, pushed and encouraged you, demanded your best and watched you leave. It hopes you love what is next, but it also hopes you never forget this home. I urge you to stay engaged with what is now your alma mater, be committed to its success and to the future students who will call it home.

You are forever connected to Salve Regina and you are forever connected to each other. The Class of 2020 is a class like no other. Congratulations to you and your families and I wish you a lifetime of happiness, success and lots and lots of luck.

Thank you for the honor of sharing this day with you.