

Good evening everyone! I am so excited to be here. There are few things in life that bring a greater sense of closure than commencement. In these brief moments we celebrate the endless hours of dedication, personal growth, and achievements. In addition, I am truly excited to simply be here. After a 7 and ½ hour drive that spanned 9 hours yesterday, I walked on this campus for the first time. For those of you that have grown weary of the regularity in coming here, I'd like to remind you of the grandeur that surrounds us! Driving to Stony Brook was easy, seeing the sub city that is this university was incredible. It did everything to further validate my feelings toward The School of Professional Development.

I completed my MA/LS through the online option; without which I would not have had the opportunity to attend this amazing school. If you take the student population, in addition to the faculty and staff here at Stony Brook, you would have about 1000 more people than the entire city of Jamestown where I live! The online option offered through the School of Professional Development dissolves geographic barriers that exist for many students like me. It creates educational and growth opportunities where they are most lacking.

As I walked around Stony Brook briefly yesterday and this morning, the pride I traveled here with grew substantially. Everything from the breathtaking landscape to the incredibly diverse buildings that structure this campus enforced what I have come to understand about this University. Stony Brook's investment in staying ahead of our perpetually changing society can be seen on and off campus. They sit at the forefront of distance education and have reinvented how education is delivered and received. On campus, we are surrounded by enormous growth seen in the various construction and the state of the art technology faculties.

I tried to imagine a young Kevin Railey walking around this campus, how it must have looked to him nearly twenty years ago when he attended Stony Brook. I wondered if he had a similar experience the first time he entered Stony Brook or if he had already grown accustomed to the school having grown up in Long Island. Kevin Railey was the most influential professor I had the pleasure of studying with during my undergraduate years. When I discovered Stony Brook offered an online masters, I knew this was the right institution. 400 miles from here at Buffalo State College, Kevin Railey is modeling the integrity and excellence of Stony Brook. Dr. Railey graduated with both his masters and PhD from this university. The impact of his education was placed upon me as his student. His student centered teaching style, his openness to literary response, and his high writing expectations are emulated in my classroom today. I mention Dr. Kevin Railey because up until a year and a half ago, he was all I knew about Stony Brook University. Ultimately, that was all I needed to know. The single greatest exterminating factor in my applying at Stony Brook University was Dr. Kevin Railey.

I believe this is the magnitude of the influence we each carry away with us today. Both the opportunity and the responsibility to inspire in others what we ourselves have been fortunate enough to gain from our experiences here. That is what education can do. It can place you in a position to move people, inspire people, and change their course. Whether you are graduating today with the necessary tools for permanent certification, a Masters in human resources, environmental management, or certifying as a school leader – you are in a position to influence others. So often that influence will not be immediately

realized, rather it is an investment in the potential of other people. Dr. Railey was completely unaware of his impact on my life until I was asked to deliver this speech tonight. When mulling over what I should say and how I should focus this opportunity, I contacted Dr. Railey. It had been eight years since I had him as a professor and still he took the time to talk with me and guide me through this process. It occurs to me now that I hope to get a phone call like that one day. I hope we all get one!

My personal experience has been tremendous. Like most of you here today, I was taking classes while life continued around me. During one semester a fellow student gave birth to her first child, another semester I learned that someone else moved to a new state during our term. I worked as an adjunct at two different community colleges, had three children to take care of and an amazingly supportive husband. I also had the horror of losing two aunts while taking courses. The first one passed away six weeks into my start here. While traveling across country to attend her funeral, I was able to distract my pain by reading literature. I submitted assignments that week in the business office of a hotel and did not have to increase my loss by withdrawing from school. These are just some of the life events that easily impede a student's ability to succeed. Through the School of Professional Development, that did not have to happen.

Given the unique structure of this school and the degree programs, I was initially challenged by the task of writing this speech. I have sat through the customary commencements of high school, my associate's degree, and my bachelors. Nothing particularly memorable seemed to have occurred at any of them. In my mind they all sort of blend together with an overreaching theme of "the future". In high school, we were the future of this country. In college, the future stood before us. Even as an educator who has participated in commencement, the same idea seems to ring out each year. I thought long and hard about that in my preparation for today. What exactly did the theme of future have to play out in our commencement today?

The students of the School of Professional Development are not in a holding pattern while attending graduate courses, waiting to see what the future would hold for us upon completion. We are working, some raising families as well. We are the leaders of now, the future is now, and we have not paused in our progress to contemplate it – we have created it and lived it simultaneously. While immersed in our professional careers we forged new necessary paths for our futures.

I didn't wait until the degree was in my hand to use what I was learning – I turned it around and applied immediately. I didn't wait until the following semester to introduce concepts of Color Blind Racism to the Rhetoric and Composition classes I teach, I brought Professor Karron's ideas over directly.

There was no time to wait on introducing the nontraditional female night students I teach to the empowering and uplifting messages I learned from Dr. Flores, Dr. Koppelman, and Dr. Hunter's women's studies courses.

Likewise, when teaching Literature, Dr. Semansky's powerful poetry lectures and fascinating collection of working literature; Dr. Young's literature and society; and Dr. Brown's Identity within the American Family, breathed new breath into my own classrooms.

While living in the dichotomy of both a student here at Stony Brook and a professional educator, the knowledge was revolving. It is my opinion that there is nothing more powerful and profound to be found in education than an immediate opportunity to make it relevant.

In closing, I would like to directly address the people in this room who are not wearing a flashy red gowns and stylish caps. All of the family members and friends that are busting with pride at your loved one's accomplishments, it is vital that you take a moment of pride at your own accomplishment. There is no success to be found without support. I know that I could not have succeeded in my goals as a graduate student without my family that is here tonight. My husband has been a consistent source of encouragement, particularly when I felt most discouraged! He shouldered the many responsibilities that slipped away from me and was a true partner in this undertaking. My parents constant support and faith, my sister's silent encouragement through her role modeling, and my oldest son Devin, who inspires in me the need to always find our personal greatness, pulled me through this experience.

The support each of the family members here today provided for their graduates is pivotal. So thank you – thank you for going into the war like trenches of graduate school to be the silent advocate for your loved one. Thank you for tolerating the midnight study sessions, the last minute paper revisions, and the long periods of mental disconnect that come with being around a graduate student.

If you are the spouse of a graduate today, your role in their degree is likely the reason they chose you for a partner in life. Congratulations, you may now have your husband or wife back.

If you're a child of a graduate today, you should know that you are likely their biggest inspiration and motivation. Congratulations, you may now have your mother or father back.

If you're a parent or grandparent of a graduate today, take the long deserved sigh of relief. This moment is a manifestation of the many sacrifices you willingly endured to raise this graduate. Congratulations, you may now assume you've done an excellent job.

To the faculty and Staff of the School of Professional Development, thank you for the unending support in helping each of us find our way here today. Through the excellent leadership of people like Dean Edelson, we have had a beacon to light our paths. A degree is valueless without quality educators and staff. It is the hard work, each of you does, that brings about the reputation of this program. I am honored to have been a part of this institution that you create daily. Thank you.