

Thank you for that kind introduction, I am humbled. I'm very pleased to join you in celebrating this wonderful occasion. I have very fond memories of my time here and it's truly a pleasure and an honor to be back.

Congratulations to all of you. You should be very, very proud of yourselves for accomplishing this goal. Well done.

To the families of those graduating, congratulations to you and you should know that your support through this process made an enormous impact. I'm sure you're very proud of your graduates as they close this portion of their lives and prepare for their next steps in life.

It was difficult to come up with a mind blowing speech. I listened to TED talks, watched some of my favorite graduation speeches. But I hear it's hard to go viral these days, so I decided to share my experiences of growing up in rural Kenya.

I choose to share this with you because every time I reflect on my journey, I realize that it is a journey filled with many challenges. Some lost battles and some won. However, I can't fail to recognize my privilege. Privilege to have been born in a family where both my parents were teachers. This meant that education was valued in my house regardless of gender. My parents required the same of us all, 4 boys and 2 girls.

My mother, very strict, had this rule that we were to have our friends visit us, not us visiting them. I am sure a few of you can relate! It allowed her to monitor what we were doing. Every time a friend visited, my mother would put us, including the guest, to work. After one day's visit, most friends never came back. She believed that those were idle friends and that I should not spend time with them. But, my friend Esther always came back. Esther and I were thick as thieves. She was my best friend throughout elementary school. When I started 1st grade, the number of girls in our class exceeded that of boys. But by the end of our fifth grade, this was no longer the case. Indeed, it was a privilege for a girl to finish eighth grade!

An incident happened over 20 years ago but it remains fresh on my mind. My friend Esther who always sat next to me got up to go to the bathroom and all we heard next was roaring laughter from a group of boys. They were making comments while most of us girls in class were embarrassed and paralyzed. I gave Esther my sweater to cover her back where her uniform had stains of blood and not knowing what to do next, we followed her as she walked out of the classroom.

The three of us girls decided to go look for a female teacher to help us out. We did not have a privilege of a health class that taught us about menstruation. It was a taboo along with the sex education that many American teenagers here dread having. Consequently, boys often laughed and humiliated girls who happened to have spots of blood on their school uniforms. Esther was

in tears and before we could make it to the staffroom, she took off running. That day, she went home and never came back to school.

We still reported the event to the female teachers who followed up with Esther. However, the embarrassment was too much for her to bear. She briefly attended another school nearby but ended up dropping out once the news of her incident reached the new school. A year later, by the time we were starting high school, she was expecting a baby.

At the end of my 5th grade, my parents decided to take me to a boarding school because my mother believed it would grant me the best chance to finish 8th grade. This was a privilege to have someone who recognized the potential in me and invested in my education. At the moment, my mother's comments did not mean much to me. Unfortunately, she died before she got a chance to see me graduate from high school.

I had the privilege of attending The White Mountain School for my high school training. I was a member of the Dark Blue team. We kept winning all the team events. Notably, Julie Yates, the Dean of Students at that time, was a member of Light Blue team. She kept adding extra points to her team and by default, the Light Blue team would usually win. I also had the honor of being a proctor, the school president, a captain for the Soccer and Lacrosse teams. I hope Proctor Academy no longer wins all the games! I also had the honor of going on some amazing community service trips. One of the them was the Dominican Republic trip with Josh Lawton and Matthew Toms whose humor made the trip extra fun. Whenever you asked Matt Toms to take a picture of you, he would take a picture of half of your face. Imagine the disappointment when you realized at the end of the day that the monument in the background was not captured, nor your whole self! We tried to avoid having him take pictures during the rest of the trip. Anyway, there were 11 students driven by the idea of giving back to the community and within two weeks, we had build a dental clinic for Haitian immigrants. I learned the importance of community service and giving back. It was a privilege that many are not able to experience. It instilled in me the idea of dedicating myself to something larger than myself.

Every summer, I traveled to Kenya to visit my family. The Summer of 2005 was a rough one due to my father's passing a year after my mother's death. Both of my parents, like many other people in the village, lost their lives due to lack of access to healthcare.

In the Summer of 2006, my siblings and I set out to make my parent's dream a reality. They always dreamt of having a healthcare facility in our village. At the time the closest hospital was over 15 miles away! 12 years later, this facility has served hundreds of thousands of patients from Lwala and surrounding communities. This dream did not end with a healthcare facility. Given the complex interplay of various determinants of health, we took on a holistic approach in

improving the wellbeing of our community, and one of our main focus has been on girls education.

On one of my trips home, the reality hit me! Amongst the girls who were my classmates in 1st grade, only two were actually still in school. I spent that summer walking from one school to another talking to girls about their experiences at school. I came to a realization that girls were dropping out of school at an alarming rate. Now you might ask yourself, “why does that happen?” Well, the barriers to a girl’s education are multiple, the main barrier being that families choose to educate their sons instead of their daughters. The gender gap in education perpetuates structural gender inequality and poor health among girls. Moreso, through these conversations, I also learned that there were multiple issues making it harder for girls to stay in school past 8th grade. I was struck by the fact that it was truly a privilege to be a girl attending high school, and that thousands of my peers never enjoyed that privilege!

The summer of my senior year here at the White Mountain School, I conducted research and found out that menstruation is linked to high rates of school absences and dropouts among girls due to lack of sanitary supplies. Poor menstrual hygiene has an immediate, significant impact on the health and well-being of adolescent girls and thus a long-term impact on their education.

Moved by the concept of sustainability and social entrepreneurship, I implemented a women’s income-generating group called the New Vision in our village in Kenya. Tasked with sewing reusable menstrual pads and school uniforms, the project aimed at increasing school attendance among girls. The project offered employment to women openly living with HIV in a community which had been struggling with stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS.

Next year, the New Vision Group will be celebrating 10 years of operation. In these 10 years, the group has employed 54 women, provided over 6,000 free school uniforms and more than 4,500 free menstrual pads to students in my village of Lwala and the neighboring communities. We have created a strong partnership with different schools and entrepreneurs here in the U.S. Amongst them include Thistle Farm, Johnson and Johnson, Harpeth Hall school, Got Your Back and Project for Peace. We have had the honor of being invited to the United Nations 55th Commission on Status of Women to represent rural women and girls. And on several occasions we have been recognized at the Clinton Global Initiative and Clinton Global University for an Outstanding Commitment to the health and education of girls in rural communities.

To whom much is given, much is required. It was really a privilege for a girl like me to be able to attend the WMS and I am forever grateful for that opportunity. I have not only made lifetime friends, but above all, I was able to fulfill my mother’s dream of pursuing education. This privilege enabled me to dream beyond my wildest dream, including pursuing a registered nurse,

RN, degree after finishing college. This privilege enabled me to make a tangible impact on reducing the gender gap in education. This privilege made me realize that there is no endeavour too small when it comes to making this world a better place when it comes to social justice. My challenge for you today as you leave this beautiful campus is to hone in on your interest. No idea is too small or too bizarre!

Take that idea, put it into action and the ripple effects will be felt. For as Margaret Mead once said, never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has! Go change the world, make it better than you found it.