

**FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY
COMMENCEMENT**

UNDERGRADUATE CEREMONY

**May 17, 2009
10:00 a.m.**

Valedictory Speaker

Colleen Michelle Gibson

Good morning Father President, members of the Board of Trustees, honored guests, members of the faculty and administration, family, friends, and members of the graduating class of 2009.

“What will come of all of this?” That was the thought that flashed through my mind as I sat in the shadow of a massive landfill in the Philippines last summer. The place I was in was known as Payatas, a village built on the city dump of Manila, forgotten by many but forged onto my heart during a Fairfield service/immersion trip to the Philippines and Australia.

We entered the community as strangers. In the midst of stray dogs, tin huts, and polluted streams, we were guests of the religious sisters who served Payatas and, by extension, we were guests of the entire village. The community welcomed our group letting us walk their streets, learn about their lives, and ultimately, discover our place in it all.

Throughout our trip, our guides had warned us that it would be the children of the Philippines who would capture our hearts and be our greatest hosts. And truly, it was the children of Payatas who eased my fears, stole my heart, and allowed me to openly and totally immerse myself in the experience.

As the day’s games began, children started to swarm all over us, vying for our attention, grabbing at any and every loose piece of clothing on our bodies. After only a few games, I sat down to watch from the sidelines, but before I knew it I had three little bodies sitting on my lap, bouncing up and down on my knees.

With each bounce of my knee upwards they gleefully squealed and as I felt them come down again, I smiled more and more. And before I knew it, one little boy, in tattered clothes and with a slowly-healing wound on the back of his head, had fallen fast asleep in my lap.

Amid the jubilant chaos all around us, I simply took in my surroundings- the sound of children running and playing, the sight of community members lining the basketball court we were on, the weight of the child collapsed on my lap, and the mound of garbage rising above their homes, filling the air with a stench so foul it penetrated everything- and in the midst of all of this, I was at peace... as comfortable as the little boy fast asleep on my lap and filled with the happiness of the people all around me. Happy people who had nothing; Happy people who lived in the most dismal of conditions; Happy people who made a living by sifting through other people's garbage; These people, despite all of their hardships, had an unspeakable joy in their lives, a joy that shone through in their love for others. The spirit of these people spoke to my heart, reminding me that life is meant to be cherished with joy, love, and unity no matter where you are. And sitting in the shadow of that dump, I wondered to myself "what would come of this all?" Would I ever step foot in Payatas again? Would the child asleep in my lap ever escape this dump? Would the joy I felt ever escape me or was it meant to change me? To challenge me to find the places where I could find comfort in the arms of another, where I could take rest despite my wounds. To dare me to infuse such joy into my being that I might never lose it. The answer I found was in discovering the root of that joy: a call to live my life in love with others.

This call is one that has been echoed throughout our time at Fairfield and is embodied in the education we've received. It is here that we learned the value of a liberal arts education. It is here, in the diversity of the core, that we began to realize that education means much more than just passing tests; it means living what you've learned and bearing the burden of an education.

My sophomore year, I can distinctly remember a professor telling my class that if anyone was not ready to be changed by the material we would learn, they should leave right then and there. She told us that an education is a dangerous thing---and she was right. Once you know something, once you've opened your life to the possibility of learning, there is no going back.

You cannot forget injustice; once you have come face-to-face with it, you must bear the burden of an education. We must live with our knowledge of the realities of this world and, even more, we must handle the burden of the knowledge

that we have the ability to do something about it. If we choose not to rise to this challenge, we betray ourselves; we let down those who have nurtured our ability, and responsibility, to stand up for what we believe. We diminish the time that we have spent in service to others, diminish our efforts to create a legacy on this campus, and diminish the communities to whom we have given our very selves and who, in return, have given us the room to find our identities and passions. When we choose not to rise to that challenge, we settle for the status quo, we choose to stop growing and to stop learning. Thus, it is with bittersweet joy that I must tell you all that you and I have spent the last four years and thousands of dollars only to learn that our work has just begun.

At this point, I should probably welcome you to the real world. For good or for bad, our time at Fairfield has come to a close. And while we prepare to say good bye to this campus, it is not our time to say hello to the real world. No, I am not in denial. I am reassured that we have already started our lives in the real world. For if today is the first time that you will have to face the world on your own, the first time that you will think critically about the world around you, or the first time that you will have to truly encounter and be with others, then you, my friends, leave this ceremony today simply with a piece of paper and a whole lot more learning to do. But if the world that lies before you today is one that you have encountered, one that you have used your time at Fairfield to experience, then there is no need for me to welcome you to the real world.

This world is one that we have been taught to set aflame. We are called to discover our passions by taking notice of what it is that truly calls us to be men and women for others. We are called to kindle justice by standing for those that have no one else to advocate for them. We are called to ignite others to do the same by being the most honest version of ourselves we can be. By allowing the flame of your passions to come through in the person that you are, others will be compelled to do the same. Whatever it is that brings you joy, embrace it and share it. For if my time at Fairfield has taught me anything, it is that passion is contagious.

Seeing someone driven enough to dedicate their life to something not only inspires others, it calls them to action. We have found such dedication here at Fairfield. We have found it in the faculty, who has taught us to love the pursuit of knowledge, refused to let us settle for mediocrity, and inspired us to engaged lives of learning. Staff members have dedicated themselves to guiding and giving us opportunities that we never could have imagined four years ago. Our mentors have shared their lives with us, giving us hope and inspiration for today and tomorrow. Alumni have given back to this community so that it can continue to provide for a

new generation the gifts that it has already given them. We have found inspiration, support, and acceptance in our peers, who surround us today. Our peers have shown dedication in relationships, rallied for the causes that matter to us, and tirelessly pursued excellence in every aspect of our lives. These are the people that we have spent the last four years with and these are the people whose impact will remain with us for years to come.

As freshman, our class sat in this exact spot to hear the words of *Dead Man Walking* author Sister Helen Prejean as she offered the address at our academic convocation. In the drawl of a native southerner, she offered us insight not only into the power of one person to stand up for another, but challenged us to stand beside those we seek to help. It is one thing to stand for what you believe; it is quite another to stand with someone else so that they might simply have the freedom to stand. It is in this act that we affirm what we believe; in sacrificing ourselves so that others might be allowed to simply be themselves, we discover our true character and embody what we have been taught during our time at Fairfield. College is a time of formation, but for any member of the Fairfield Class of 2009 these past four years have been not only formative but transformative. And in this process of transformation Fairfield has become a part of who we are.

And so now finally as I look out over this field of people, I must ask “What will come of all of this?” Today I see the challenge posed to me by a sleeping child, a religious sister, and a Fairfield education in a new light. “What will come of all of this?” Will the steps you have taken on this campus continue? Will you have the courage to stand for what you believe? And will you use all that Fairfield has given you to hold tight to, bear the burden for, and stand beside those who have no one else?