

# Fairfield University Graduate Student Valedictory Address

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*Delivered by Beth Lambert, a Wilton, Conn., resident who earned a master of arts degree in American Studies from the College of Arts & Sciences.*

Father von Arx, Faculty, Graduates, and Distinguished Guests:

Four years ago when I enrolled in the American Studies Graduate Program at Fairfield I was a high school history teacher on an unofficial sabbatical, taking some time off to raise my first child. When I began the program she was just over a year old. I was thrilled when I found the Fairfield Graduate program because it offered a rigorous course of academic study with convenient and flexible class times and course offerings that would enable me to stay home with my daughter and pursue a graduate education simultaneously. It was the perfect solution for a stay-at-home mother looking to enrich her mind and build an even stronger foundation for a career in education. Little did I know that the American Studies graduate program would not only enrich my mind but it would serve as a platform to launch a new career that I now feel is the most meaningful and important thing I have ever done, or ever will do, in my lifetime.

As I worked my way through my first few American Studies classes, I began to develop a deep understanding of American culture. Interestingly, I did not develop an admiration for all things American, rather, I developed the ability to carefully scrutinize American culture—a skill that would serve me well in the coming years. While I think it is important that an American Studies program expose students to elements in American culture worthy of respect and admiration, such as Jazz music or great American literature, I think it is of greater importance that such a program expose students to the sometimes ugly underbelly of American culture and society. The ability to examine one's own culture and society with a critical eye is especially important in a society like ours where powerful forces continuously try to influence our opinions through media and marketing. In an era when very few people are taught media literacy, we must rely on our ability to think critically and independently. This includes being able to step outside of our own culture and scrutinize it when necessary.

While I would have loved to have completely thrown myself into my American Studies classes and spent all of my days critiquing American culture, my personal life simply would not allow this. About halfway through the program, things in my personal life slowly began to unravel. Over the course of her second year, my daughter began to develop a variety of health issues. She demonstrated many bizarre symptoms that no one doctor could explain or help treat. She had some symptoms shared by children on the autism spectrum, such as sensory processing disorder, eczema, food allergies, inflammation in her intestines, and behavioral problems. She did not have autism, yet no doctor, not her pediatrician, nor the gastroenterologist, nor the psychiatrist, nor anyone else could provide us with any sort of diagnosis. She was just a child in pain with an assortment of health and behavioral issues that no one could explain. Getting help for my daughter and an explanation for her health issues consumed me.

Just about the time that the management of her symptoms was escalating into a full-time job, I had my second daughter (who was also developing strange health issues) and I was approaching the end of my course of study in the American Studies graduate program. I had taken an assortment of different classes in the program, all of which sharpened my critical thinking skills. If I learned one pearl of wisdom from my many professors at Fairfield, it was to never take anything at face value. Truth is almost never present at the surface of an issue. You must dig deep to develop an understanding of what motivates people or why things are the way they are. And so, with this insight in hand, I began to dig deep and critically examine why my children were sick. It turns out, to make a very long story short, that elements of American culture—the very thing that I was studying and learning about in my graduate program—were making my children sick. I will explain.

By the spring of 2009, months of research and exploration had led me to develop a hypothesis about why my children were sick. Very specific elements of American culture were affecting the health and wellness of my

children. What's more, I learned that my children were not the only ones with bizarre symptoms that eluded a diagnosis. My children were only two of millions of children affected by one of the most insidious and potentially devastating health crises of our times. My children were part of an epidemic of chronic illness striking the current generation of children. Most of you have probably heard the following statistics in the news media:

- One in 91 children (and one in 57 boys) have autism
- One in eight children have asthma (and one in five African American children)
- One in six children have a learning or behavioral disorder
- One in 10 children have ADHD
- One in two college age young adults have a psychiatric diagnosis

And there are many more equally devastating trends: Food allergies, inflammatory bowel disease, celiac disease, juvenile diabetes, and many more once rare illnesses are all on the rise in the pediatric population. Those of you graduating from the Nursing or Education and Allied Professions programs have probably seen these statistics first hand, and if not, you will encounter them shortly. Many more children, like my own, do not have definitive diagnoses but show subtle signs of ill health through a variety of inexplicable symptoms and signs. And although developed nations like the UK and Japan are also experiencing record numbers of children affected by these illnesses and disorders, American children are, by far, affected in the greatest numbers. For those graduates in the business program, I am sure you understand that these statistics also mean that our nation will soon be saddled with the tremendous economic burden associated with caring for and supporting the ever-increasing numbers of children with chronic illnesses. Even those of you graduating from the Engineering program will be affected by this epidemic, as the growing population of chronically ill children will have different needs in the marketplace, touching everything from software development to medical device design.

With a new awareness of this horrible epidemic, I had to know—why are American children the most chronically ill children on the planet? I needed to find out, what is it about American society and culture that makes our children so susceptible to chronic illnesses like asthma, autism and food allergies? Fortunately, I was enrolled in an American Studies graduate program—I had the perfect opportunity to pursue a research project aimed at understanding what in American culture and society could be contributing to this epidemic.

So this is just what I did. I outlined a lengthy and involved research project and approached my favorite Fairfield professor and the director of the program, Dr. Leo O'Connor. I asked him to humor me--to let me research and explore why American culture could be contributing to the epidemic of chronic illness in children. With Dr. O'Connor's blessing I set out on a yearlong journey of research and learning. During this year I interviewed experts, scanned the medical literature, read volumes of books on the history and evolution of the American medical system and developed a thorough understanding of American dietary habits and American lifestyles. In the end, I learned that particular elements of American society, our corporatocracy, our healthcare system, our way of eating, working and living—all of these things were leaving our children overmedicated, undernourished, and exposed to a panoply of toxic substances. Collectively, these environmental factors have created an entire generation of children with weakened immune systems struggling to survive in a toxic world. I learned that this is the sickest generation of children on record and that this health crisis was of our own making.

At the conclusion of this year of research I had not only completed my capstone project but I had written nearly 300 pages of a book. That book, now titled *A Compromised Generation: The Epidemic of Chronic Illness in America's Children* will be released by Sentient Publications this spring. My American Studies capstone research project served as a springboard for what I believe to be a very important book about a very important topic concerning the health and wellness of our children and our country.

While completing my capstone project and the book I began to see that the magnitude of this problem was so great that writing a book about it would not even scratch the surface. It is for this reason that I also founded a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization called Parents Ending America's Childhood Epidemic (whose acronym is PEACE). This organization is dedicated to educating parents and the public about the epidemic of chronic ill-

ness affecting our children and connecting parents to healthcare providers who can help children recover from their particular illnesses. Running this non-profit has now become my new part-time, full-time, unpaid job and I am simply desperate to get the word out. This is my new mission in life, my new purpose, and my new passion. I loved being a high school history teacher, and I hope that I can go back to this career one day, but for now I have set my sights on something that is more meaningful to me and something that I feel will have a greater impact on the future of our children.

It has been four years since I started at Fairfield. I now have three children, a book, a non-profit organization, and a crystal clear understanding of my purpose in life. My two daughters are now healthy, happy, thriving children and I have an infant son, who, knock on wood, is showing no signs of ill health. When I set out on my graduate study journey four years ago, I never would have dreamed that my life would have veered in such a different direction. My graduate education provided me with an incredible depth of knowledge regarding American culture and society, but it also allowed me to find my purpose and passion. I hope that my fellow graduates have been able to find a similar purpose and passion through their time and experiences at Fairfield University. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to those professors who have shared their wisdom and insight and who have served as wonderful mentors and advisors throughout my graduate education. Congratulations fellow graduates, best of luck, and I hope that you leave here today feeling as fulfilled and grateful as I do, for we have received a tremendous gift—the gift of education and the opportunity for personal growth. Thank you.