

Fairfield University Undergraduate Commencement, May 19, 2013

Valedictory Address

By Kevin Reda, of Pleasantville N.Y., a politics and International Studies double major with a minor in economics

Father President, Members of the Board of Trustees, Honored Guests, Members of the Faculty and Administration, Family, Friends and Members of the Class of 2013, I am honored and humbled to have the opportunity to speak to you today. I want to take my time today talking about how the Jesuit values have influenced the growth of our class over our time here, not solely as students, but as human beings in an ever-complex world.

To do this, I drew inspiration from the words of Jim Valvano, one of the most influential coaches modern sports has ever seen. I have spent the last three years coaching high school lacrosse at Fairfield Prep, and the ability of coaches and mentors to serve and inspire people has become very important to me. Valvano's story centers on his time at NC State University, where he served as the head men's basketball coach, before being diagnosed with incurable cancer. Shortly before his impending death, he gave one of the most memorable speeches in sports history at ESPN's Espy Awards. There is one part of the speech that has always stuck with me through my time here at Fairfield. Valvano said, "To me, there are three things we should all do every day. We should do this every day of our lives. Number one is Laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think, you should spend some time in thought. Number three is, you should have your emotions moved to tears. It could be happiness or joy. But think about it, if you laugh, you think, and you cry, that's a full day, that's a heck of a day." There are countless examples of how each of the three components has found their way into our experiences over the last four years. I am going to highlight a few that speak to our legacy here at Fairfield.

First among Valvano's recommended daily exercises is laughter. This may be the most obvious of the three, but its true importance cannot be underestimated. We laughed freshmen year when riding the stag statue became a weekend ritual, and sophomore year when campus was under construction, and walking through the village became a battle of the elements. We laughed countless nights junior year at the townhouses and all across the world through study abroad, with those experiences largely defining our time at Fairfield to that point. And this last year, senior year, we have laughed at the Seagrape, Levee, Field, and everywhere in

between. We laughed when the grape reopened after Sandy and nothing had changed, and when 3 feet of snow left us trapped in our apartments and houses for the weekend. These last few weeks have allowed me to reflect on all the times we have laughed, and how each memory solidified the value of having our classmates there to laugh with us. I believe that an understanding of Valvano's first lesson is essential because without an appreciation for laughter life can become truly unbearable.

The second point Valvano offers centers on thought, calling for both intellectual and spiritual reflection. During our time at Fairfield, the core curriculum has facilitated both a broad and acute development of our intellectual faculties. Whether it was a minds and bodies honor course taught by Dr. Lakeland and Dr. Boryczka that challenged our very existence as human beings. Or an Art History Class taught by Dr. Schwab that focused solely on the Parthenon in Ancient Athens, we were all challenged in unique ways to diversify our understanding of the world and our place in it.

Whether it was a domestic or international service trip, an open visions forum, a study abroad opportunity, a comprehensive living and learning community experience, or an in game decision made by our student athletes on their respective fields or courts, these last few years have given us countless opportunities to push the boundaries of our intellectual capacity, and we are all better for it.

As an International Studies major, I was uniquely challenged by my professors during my capstone project, the most comprehensive and rewarding undergraduate academic experience of my career. For me, this included an analysis of the role of technology in the liberation movements of the Arab Spring, a project that highlighted the power of the human mind and its impact on our modern world. Although we may not leave here with an exact idea of where we will end up in the world, Fairfield has taught us how to begin to answer the question of what we are called to do, and thought is the cornerstone of that pursuit.

The third and final part of Valvano's daily exercises may be the most complex. Being moved to tears on a daily basis is not something that all of us routinely experience. But upon further reflection, I believe that it was Valvano's true passion for life, and for being alive, that moved him, and that is something **to which we should all aspire.**

For me, expressing emotion has been something that has shaped and defined me as a person. As an 11 year old, I remember crying on September 11th 2001 when my teacher told me a plane had hit my father's office building, and they weren't sure if he had survived. I have also cried every year since on that day when I mourn the loss of all those who died, and I thank God that my father survived and is in the audience with us today.

More recently, our community and our state have been moved to tears many times over the past year. From the devastating images of our beloved beaches after Hurricane Sandy, to the bone-chilling reality of the Sandy Hook shooting, we have watched as the world has mourned for our state, and we have mourned with them. We as a class have mourned as we lost classmates over the last four years, and although they cannot be here with us today, their memory is forever enshrined in our collective hearts.

While I think that these instances of sadness and loss are certainly a component of Valvano's message, there is more to this last part than simply sadness. Mathew's Gospel says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

The tragedy of Hurricane Sandy moved us, but the heroic images of rescue and recovery showed the power of the human will to persevere even through the darkest of days. Similarly, we were moved to tears by the candlelight vigils for Sandy Hook, both here on campus and across the country. These gatherings showed that one man's actions of hate cannot, and will not, overpower the innate goodness that God teaches all of us to approach each day with.

Most recently, I was moved by the outpouring of support from the Fairfield Community at my 5k race for M.S. M.S. awareness is a cause that is deeply personal to me, as my mother has courageously fought the disease for over a decade. Through that experience, I have learned that being a man or woman for others is not as much about the impact it has on us individually, but the ability of our selfless actions to move and inspire those that we are serving.

These last four years have changed us drastically, and over that same time the world has changed along with us. Hurricane Sandy reshaped our once familiar beaches, a reality that reminded us of the fragile nature of the world we live in. The Catholic Church elected its first Jesuit Pope, a sign of the ever-growing role of St. Ignatius's teachings across the Catholic world. As we move on from our time here at Fairfield, the world will continue to change around us, and I hope that our experiences have taught us to challenge the world to be better, and more just, each and every day.

As my time with you, and our time here at Fairfield, comes to a close, I hope that you will remember all of the things that Fairfield has taught us, and strive to include Valvano's messages in your lives moving forward. While we may not know where our lives will take us from here, I know that being a member of the Fairfield community will always be one of the most important parts of our lives. I thank you all for your time today, and congratulate the class of two thousand thirteen on a truly remarkable four years. And, as we all go out into the world tomorrow, as Fairfield Alumni, I challenge you to take one last lesson from Coach Valvano to heart. Whatever you may doing and wherever you may be, don't you give up, don't you ever give up.