

## May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010-AACC Graduation

Valedictory Speech given by Alexandra Houston-Ludlam

Thank you, Dr. Myer. President Smith, honored guests, faculty, students, family, friends- I'm honored to be able to speak to you all tonight.

First, I want to recognize all the families and friends represented here. We, **the class of 2010**, have put tremendous amount of work into getting here tonight. But **none of us** would have made it without the support of others. Whether it was helping us pay for school, helping us with our homework, or just being there when we needed to vent, we wouldn't be here without you. I would like to particularly thank my family. Mom- your dedication and guidance have always inspired me. Dad- your strength and patience always keep me going. Both of you have worked so hard to support me in everything I do and I will always be grateful. My little brother Doug- thank you for always challenging me and keeping me on my toes. And Carmen- you are the best cheerleader and sister I could ever ask for.

To the Faculty- thank you for your dedication to helping us become not only better students, but also better people. You have shared your knowledge with us, held us to high standards, and challenged us to stretch ourselves. I would like to especially thank Dr. Louis Aymard- you have been more than a professor- you've been a mentor, editor, counselor, and friend. Thank you for all your wisdom, guidance, and support you've shared with me. I would also like to thank Katherine Voss and Dr. Kelly Koermer in the honors department- so many great opportunities and experiences I have had over the past 2 years would not have been possible without them.

And to my fellow classmates: I salute each one of you sitting here today; you all have accomplished a great task that will support your future endeavors. For some of you, that means transferring to a 4-year University. For others, it means entering the workforce for the first time or continuing with ongoing careers. This is not a day marking an end or even just a transition. This day marks one success in an ongoing journey. It is a moment to appreciate an achievement now and encourage future accomplishments to come.

Anne Arundel Community College has provided such a diverse learning environment, and has great resources that can be invaluable to students' progress if they choose to take advantage of the opportunity. In my case, I have been extremely grateful for the honors program, and for the undergraduate research opportunities I have had here. My interest is in clinical psychology, specifically in the area of adolescent mental health. Because of the opportunities here, I have been able to get research experience in several different areas of psychology, including alternative media to use in art therapy with children and looking at specific needs of adolescents in foster care. If I had attended a 4-year institution directly after high-school, I might not have had such wonderful opportunities to do research. But one of the many lessons I have learned at AACC is that there are always opportunities to succeed if one chooses to seek them out.

When I was presented with the task of writing this address, I didn't know where to begin. I spent hours reading sample speeches, watching previous speeches on you tube, and finally, like any good student, procrastinating. I found quotes from Shakespeare, Ghandi, and even the Spice Girls (remember them?). But while aiming to write the "perfect" valedictory, I noticed one

theme. All the people giving the speeches, as well as those being quoted, were all speaking of what they felt passionately about. They were inspired and had a message they wanted to share. They weren't concerned with writing a good speech. Therefore- instead of focusing on writing a good speech, I focused on writing about something important to me. Something I feel passionately about is Empathy.

Empathy, which literally translates as "in feeling", is the capability to share another being's emotions and feelings. The English word is derived from the Greek word *empathia*. But, I know you all are not here for a lecture on etymology. My point is **the feeling of empathy** is basic to who we are as human beings. We need to stretch ourselves to empathize with people who are different from us- people who don't look, speak or think like us. A little empathy is something that goes a long way. I plan to be a Clinical Psychologist, and empathy is a vital character trait to have and develop in the field of Psychology. But, also, empathy is vital to have as a human being, no matter what your field of interest. Truly being able to step out of your own perspective and into someone else's is essential to being able to gain the most out of life.

Here, at Anne Arundel Community College, for example, our population is incredibly diverse. We have students of all different ages, from different backgrounds, different countries, and with different languages. We have faculty who have just completed their graduate studies and faculty who are retired professionals, all of whom are here to help students gain the knowledge they need to succeed in their chosen fields. With such a diverse group of people working together, either great adversity or great opportunity can be born. I am a firm believer that any new opportunity can improve individuals' growth academically as well as emotionally. If we

allow ourselves to be open and to take advantage of all the differences we are exposed to, we can gain a wealth of knowledge. If we can choose to not focus on how the differences between us hinder us, but how they help us move together as a team, a class, a school, a state, a country, and a world, we will be well off in improving not only our lives and experiences, but those of others.

So my challenge to you is: see diversity as an opportunity to build empathy within yourself. Take a course you might not otherwise take- you never know where you will find something that inspires you. Instead of getting frustrated with a language barrier take the opportunity to learn something new about a different culture. Don't be a person who avoids individuals' whom others perceive as different. You don't know anyone's journey but your own and you never know how much a hello and a smile can change someone's day- or even their life.

Now go make a difference. Thank you.