

Elena Arkova - Class of 2006



Dear Members of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Macchiarola, members of the Faculty, Administration and Staff, family and friends, and, of course, my fellow graduates. It is a truly great honor for me to stand in front of you today and to share my little story.

It all began with a speech. My first class at St. Francis College and, incidentally, my first class ever taken in the United States was a Public Speaking Class with Brother Joe Moloney. Four-and-a-

half years later I still vividly remember how terrified I was by the mere thought that I would be asked to stand in front of the whole class and speak. Moreover, I would have to speak in English (that was probably the scariest part). After all, at the beginning of my freshman year I had spent a total of three months in the United States.

I wish I could tell you that my first speech turned out to be just fine. The truth is that it did not. In my nightmares I still go back to the moment when I was given a simple task of telling about the most memorable moment of my life and I could not come up with a single word. I just stood there staring into the audience, frozen with fear, my mind completely blank...

Nevertheless, that speech, or rather, that silence means a lot for me since it was the opening line to the whole new chapter of my life which is called "St. Francis College". And today I am privileged to be asked to conclude this chapter with another speech, the Valedictory Address.

At this point of my life I am still trying to figure out what exactly has happened to me, as a St. Francis College student, one of more than 300 graduates who have gathered here today, during the years that separate this moment from the moment I entered the college for the first time. It will probably take some time (perhaps days, months or even years) to understand the importance of the little things that happened to us while at St. Francis College. It is even possible that the real meaning and value of some of the experiences we had in this school will never become apparent. It is not always easy to see the reason why certain things occur, even though nothing happens without a purpose.

However, I already know why I will never regret at least one decision that I have made in my life, the decision to attend St. Francis College.

Thanks to St. Francis, I have acquired much more than just the Bachelor of Science in Chemistry and a vast array of both theoretical and practical knowledge associated with the degree I am about to receive. During the time I spent taking all the required credits, I also had an opportunity to learn about the real issues which are often more complicated than formulas and problems that we deal with in chemistry. In fact, the main reason I enjoy science so much is because most of the time it is so logical and in some sense simple. In science as opposed to real life almost everything is either or: yes or no, black or white, right or wrong. And although I decided to major in science and will probably continue to further pursue this area of study as a part of my career, I will inevitably encounter some tough situations in my professional and personal life which will call for skills which are not typically taught as a part of the undergraduate curriculum. I am very grateful that, because of the time I spent at St. Francis, I feel much more prepared and much better equipped to deal with these difficult situations than I was four-and-a-half years ago.

Of course, none of the wonderful experiences that I, or any other member of this graduating class, had at St. Francis College would be possible without the individual people, whose collective efforts make the school one whole, thriving community (which I actually prefer to call a family).

I was privileged to meet so many professors whom I will always remember as great teachers, mentors and tutors. In particular I would like to thank Dr. Wolfe and Dr. Forsberg for being so sincerely concerned about me and for taking all my achievements so personally.

It is a fact that not so many colleges around the country can boast that close interaction between the faculty and students that takes place here at SFC. In this school every professor knows his or her students by name and treats every member of the class as an individual which certainly facilitates the learning process. I am sure that many students (myself included) have benefited from this kind of personalized approach to higher education. I wish I could address every professor who has made a difference in my life, but then I would have to name all the professors that I had, and that, unfortunately, is not possible.

My teachers, however, are not the only people who have made St. Francis College my second family. I am grateful for the fact that I had a chance to meet several people, whom I am proud to call my friends, here at SFC. In Russia, where I am originally from, we say that it is much better to have 100 friends than 100 rubles (or dollars for that matter). I think that it is important to remember this little piece of ancient folk wisdom today when it seems like anything can be bought and sold. Lydia-Ann and Tricia, thank you for being there for me. Your help and support have made my life much richer than any amount of money possibly could.

Then, of course, I have to remember that SFC would never become my second family if it was not for my first. I would like to thank my husband, Alexey, without whom I would never have come to the United States to begin with. I cannot help being deeply grateful to my two-year-old daughter, Sophia, for being the greatest motivation and inspiration for all my achievements, present and future. I would also like to give special thanks to my mother, Tatiana, who has crossed the Atlantic to be here with me today. I would like to ask my mother to stand, please. If you all would excuse me for a moment I would like to address to my mother in Russian, our native language. (Address in Russian). What I just said was: Dear Mother, I cannot thank you enough for everything that you did. You have given me the most precious gift one can ever receive, you have given me life. You also did your best to make my life enjoyable and worth living. I cannot thank you enough, but would like you to know that I love you, Mom, and I always will.

It definitely has been a long way from my first St. Francis speech to my last. I have to admit that some things apparently never change. For instance, I am still terrified to speak in public. However, many things do change, especially if you work hard enough. It looks as if I have just given a speech. In English. In front of you all. For me that definitely is a big change. Four-and-a-half years ago I would never have believed that I could do this, but here I am, and here we are. And everything that has occurred to me in between these two memorable speeches makes me believe that nothing happens by accident, there is always a reason behind everything that occurs. I hope that my little story will make you a believer too.

Thank you, everybody,

And good luck!