

Jessica Minotti Verderame's 2008 Valedictorian Speech



Good Afternoon!

Members of the Board of Trustees, President Macchiarola, members of the Faculty, Administration and Staff, family, friends, and fellow graduates, it is an *honor* to address you today.

I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to begin this speech. I thought I should begin with something simple, like “if at first you don’t succeed..... do it like your mother told you”... but that wasn’t it. Then I found an inspirational quote that says... “Do not follow where the path may lead, go instead where there *is* no path and leave a trail.” This is a good one... but it still wasn’t quite right. I finally found the perfect quote to set the pace for this day, said by

former mayor Ed Koch:

“The fireworks begin today! Each diploma is a lighted match...each one of YOU is a fuse.”

Each one of us has a different story of how we came to St. Francis, and we all have experiences that have *profoundly* impacted our lives. I believe there is a plan for each of us. Things happen for a reason. Even though it may not seem like the right path at the time, one day we look back and we realize that things happened exactly as they should have.

For example, *I* never imagined I would graduate from a college like St. Francis! I graduated from high school *in 1999 ...in Ohio*. Who would have thought I would end up a St. Francis graduate in Brooklyn in 2008? But my road from there to here wasn’t easy. I went from Ohio, to singing and dancing in a dinner theater in Cape May, to working in a coffee shop in the World Trade Center, to working in restaurants in Manhattan, and *finally* to a student at St. Francis. My life has been rich with experiences, yet unpredictable and full of surprises. I had always wanted to go to college, and with the help of some key people, like my husband John, I was able to put my life on track. I met John while we were both working in a restaurant in Rockefeller Center... he was my boss at the time... and I was fired for dating him! Even though I like to say now that I’m the boss, he has changed my life in ways I could never have imagined.

Like I said, everything happens for a reason.

I met *another* influential man in New York. He is a Franciscan Brother who goes by the name of Brother George. My first experience of St. Francis was in his office in the summer of 2004. At the time, I was working as a reservationist for a famous chef, unsatisfied, and I heard that employees at St. Francis are allowed to take six credits per semester as part of their benefits package. It sounded like a pretty sweet deal! So I wrote a letter to Dr. Macchiarola looking for a job—any job—thinking *this* would be the *best way* to ease into college. So, I had an appointment with Brother George, who informed me that at the rate of six credits per semester, it would take me about ten years to graduate.

So he said to me: “Jessica, I want you to call your husband and tell him you are quitting your job, and you are coming here full time in September.”

I walked into his office thinking I was on a job interview, and I walked out a full time student.

Again, everything happens for a reason.

We have been given the gift of education. We have been taught to never stop questioning, encouraged to make our own trail instead of accepting barriers, and to incorporate the Franciscan Spirit into our everyday lives. What we have learned didn't only take place in the classroom, but within the entire college community. Our lives have been enriched by one another. All of us will agree that as we walk through the *one and only* entrance to St. Francis, we are surrounded by students and faculty from around the world. A few weeks ago, I was at O’Keefe’s with a group of friends to celebrate the completion of our thesis. Sitting at the table were people from different backgrounds: Puerto Rican, South American, Irish, Italian, Armenian, Polish... just to name a few. This is the magic that floods our halls *every day*. Our school is like a mini United Nations... we *celebrate* our differences and we all support one another and treat each other with respect. That is the spirit, the essence of St. Francis College.

Before I end, please allow me to thank a few people.

Brother George, thank you a thousand times over. God placed you in the path of my life at the right time, and you have done so much for me. You gave me the kick I needed to finally attend school. Most importantly, you gave me your trust and friendship, and I will *never* forget the impact you have made on my life.

I also want to thank my family for your encouragement. I love you all.

To my husband, who now likes to refer to himself as Mr. Valedictorian, thank you for supporting me through school, for staying up late to help me study, and for putting up with me when I was stressed out, which was quite often.

I love you bigger than the sky and I couldn't have a better partner to share my life with.

And to my Mom who came all the way from Ohio, I am sure eight years ago when I left home you may have wondered if I would make it to college, but thank you for never giving up hope and having faith in me! And thank you for giving me a wonderful life, a loving family, and for being not only my mom but my friend.

And so graduates, you all have individuals who have made an impact and loving people to stand behind you on your journey. Let us not forget what we have accomplished together, and remember to approach the rest of your life with the same dedication and enthusiasm. This day is both an ending and a beginning. As we leave the comfort of our St. Francis family, we should not be afraid. Take what you have learned here and carry it with you. Life won't always be easy, but the challenges make us stronger and wiser.

Alan Alda once said: "You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can't get there by bus, only by hard work and risk, and by not quite knowing what you're doing. But what you discover will be wonderful. What you discover will be yourself."

Congratulations class of 2008, and I wish you all the best of luck.