Chandra Persaud
Valedictorian Speech Spring 2011

Good afternoon members of the Board of Trustees, President Dugan, faculty and administration, distinguished guests, fellow graduates, family and friends. I must first and foremost thank God for this blessing and honor to stand before you today as Valedictorian of the Class of 2011. Yet, today is not only my day to shine. Every graduate present here is deserving of high praise and recognition and I would like to congratulate each of you on reaching this milestone in life. I think I speak for my fellow graduates when I say that this is a moment we have always imagined and one we will remember for the rest of our lives.

I come from a humble family where the values of hard work, persistence and drive are never overlooked. My parents left a relatively comfortable lifestyle in their homeland of Guyana when I was two-years-old for one thing and one thing only—opportunity. Like many other immigrant families, they viewed America as the place to accomplish what seemed impossible in the country in which they were born. Above all, my parents left Guyana in hopes of giving my sisters and me a better education, enhanced opportunities to learn, grow, and succeed. I never forget their many sacrifices for our family and took to heart their philosophy about the value of education, their teaching that while one can lose his riches or popularity over the course of his life or even part ways with good friends, education is enduring and is yours to keep for the rest of your life.

My time here at St. Francis College will forever be etched in my heart. The many opportunities I was given both inside and outside of the classroom contributed to my growth, as a student and individual. It was here, under the guidance of supportive professors and staff, that I became aware of issues, realties, and perspectives that I hardly gave a thought to before. I would like to express a heartfelt thank you to Dr. Lynne Jackson and every member of the Communication Arts Department at St. Francis. I would especially like to thank Dr. Scott Weiss, Dr. Richard Berleth, Dr. Timothy Dugan, and Professor David Gewirtz for your endless support, patience, and guidance. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Weiss for serving as my mentor and for guiding me throughout my four years at St. Francis and also to Dr. Berleth for sharing your fountain of knowledge which I admire and for inspiring me to be just as great in the career of my choosing as you are. I would also like to thank Dr. Emily Horowitz and Professor Diana Gibaldi of the Sociology Department for helping me find my voice, sharing with me refreshing perspectives that challenge everyday norms. I must also say thank you to Professor Stephen Marino of *The Arthur Miller Journal*, Director of Public Relations Mr. Richard Relkin, Director of the Academic Center Professor Mitch Levenberg, and Dr. Gregory Tague of the English Department for passing along many opportunities my way, opportunities that have strengthened my skills and allowed me to gain invaluable experience. Furthermore, on behalf of my graduating class, I would like to thank every faculty member here at St. Francis for sharing your knowledge, for serving as mentors, for your patience and support. We are honored and grateful to have you as educators and to say we were once your students. Last, I would like to say thank you to Julie and Anne Kelly for providing me with a full scholarship to attend St. Francis, alleviating me and my family of any worries about how to pay for my education. Their presence in my life is a true blessing.

I would now like to take this time to thank my family for their endless support and love. Mom, thank you for your encouraging words, your advice, and for always believing in me even at times when I gave up on myself. Just as you have stood by me and helped me accomplish so many goals, I hope to be able to fulfill many of your dreams. Dad, thank you for your support, guidance, and for the lifelong values and morals you have instilled in me. To my little sister, thank you for keeping the child inside of me alive, for always finding a way to put a smile on my face, and for your honesty. Last but not least, I am proud to share this moment with my grandmother, a person whose wisdom and spirituality I deeply admire. I am extremely grateful and thankful to be the first grandchild in my family that my grandmother will witness graduate from college. To my family, I may not say it enough, but I love you all more than words can express and without your presence in my life, I don't know where or who I would be. Maya Angelou said, "But nobody, no nobody can make it out here alone" and I think my fellow graduates will agree with me when I say that this moment would not have been possible for each of us without strong support systems and I would like to thank all of the parents, family members, and friends here today for the contributions you have made to our lives.

To my fellow graduates, we all come from different walks of life, we all have different stories to recount our journey to St. Francis College, and after today we will all embark on unique paths. Yet, the common thread that runs among us is the desire for a brighter future and despite our individualized views about what that future may look like, we chose St. Francis College to bring us one step closer to our ultimate goal, to give us the tools we need for a better future, or simply to give us a new beginning. And what we got in return was perhaps more than we ever expected—we have each found a home here at St. Francis, one filled with supportive and caring professors, administration and staff, one filled with diversity and activities to accommodate an array of interests, and a sense of community based on generosity and respect. Here, we were pushed to discover and challenge our abilities, interests, and even our identities.

My fellow graduates, I would like to leave you with these few thoughts. Nothing is ever handed to you in life. The accomplishment of your dreams and goals is only possible through dedication, passion, and effort. Don't ever become easily discouraged, believe in yourself and your dreams, stay determined in the face of adversity, and never let your fears hold you back. I truly believe that everything that happens, happens for a reason and while you may not fully understand circumstances or turn of events right away, in time you will. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever." Don't wait until tomorrow to do what you can do today; sometimes taking the road less traveled leads to unexpected opportunities and memorable experiences. But never forget to maintain the curiosity of a child and embrace opportunities that will broaden or challenge your perspectives. On your road to new adventures and endeavors, never forget to follow the Golden Rule of life and treat others as you would like to be treated. Perhaps, unaware to you, your smile, kind gesture, or encouraging words can give someone that extra boost they needed.

As we close this chapter and continue to write the pages of our lives, let's never forget the bridges we've crossed, the bonds we've shared and the memories that we've made. Let's always remember the important role that St. Francis College, the Small College of Big Dreams, played in helping us accomplish some of our many goals.

Congratulations once again and I wish each of you health, strength, prosperity, and happiness now and in the future!! Thank you.