I’d like to begin by thanking Dr. Kristine Young, as well as Gerianne Brusati and the entire administration here at SUNY Orange for giving me this opportunity to share my words with all of you today.

I would also like to take a moment to recognize the guidance and encouragement of Professors Amanda Crowell and Stephen Meagher, and to give a very special thank you to Professor Diane Bliss for giving me my very first “C” on a paper and thereby encouraging me to never settle and to always aim higher. Congratulations on your retirement, Professor Bliss, I hope you enjoy every minute of it.

And my last thank you, which actually comes before anything else in this entire world, is to my daughter, Katherine. You are my motivation for everything I do. You were the love of my life from the moment I laid eyes on you, and you are the greatest accomplishment I will ever achieve. Thank you for being patient with me while I build a better life for us. I love you to the moon.

Orange County Community College. Community college. Doesn’t have the same ring as Harvard does it?

And yet, it is times like these that … We need community more than ever.

When Bob Dylan sang that “the times they are a changing”, his was a sentiment that would come to resonate with every generation after.

Indeed, we are generation experiencing profound changes in the way we communicate, contribute, and care. Changes in the way we live and love and learn.

We are subject to powerful world events and polarizing world leaders. We are sometimes struck by debilitating fear and uncertainty.

But like all of history, this cycle of challenges is simply repeating itself, and like history, what sees us through these times is *community*.

A community is defined as “a body of persons having common social, economic, or political interest, or a common history”

Now, we are wide and wonderfully varied group of students. Socially, we come from different lives, different places, and, in my case, different decades.

as for political interests? Well there is the age old adage about religion and politics and I figured that just maybe, actually, that definitely applies to a commencement speech.

But what we do share, whether we like it or not, is a history.

A history of first day jitters, and losing our way, both on campus and in life. Of the professors we love, and the ones we may not. Of late night cramming and copious amounts of coffee. Of exam nerves, and writers block, and deadlines, and victories, and failures.

And it is this history that, by definition, creates our community.

When I stepped on to this campus just under two years ago I was 30 years old. I was a mother of one and I had probably worked more jobs than both of your parents combined. I had little to no direction in my life, and… I thought I knew everything.

But what I didn’t know was that … in addition to learning a whole lot literature, and spending one really crazy summer learning astronomy on the Rowley center roof…

My peers and my professors, this new community I had inherited, would become the springboard that would propel me to standing on this stage and telling my story today. It would be their support, their wisdom and their contributions that would carry me through two of the toughest years of my life.

And so I made a point. to cultivate that sense of community. To encourage bonding and friendship amongst this assorted and eclectic group of students, that I, on the surface, had nothing in common with.

So as you move forward into your bright and exciting futures, promise yourself that you won’t

Judge a class by the first day — the seemingly worst teachers on day one tend to be the most influential on day 101.

Or judge a peer by whether or not they fit your idea of a friend, because you never know who is in need of help or understanding or just a kind word.

And don’t pass up an opportunity to potentially change someone’s day with just a simple hello.

I’d like to end today with a bit of poetry, as it is something that I am very passionate about. I’ve had innumerable and unparalleled opportunities provided to me here at SUNY Orange to explore my love of this subject.

The grandfather of American Poetry, Walt Whitman, is someone that, as students, I’m sure we have all shared some part of this journey with.

And although community will indeed lift us up and support us, there will be times when you will question just what the hell you are doing here, and for that questioning, the old man with the wise beard has just the thing.

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,

Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill’d with the foolish,

Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)

Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew’d,

Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,

Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,

The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

                                     *Answer.*

That you are here—that life exists and identity,

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.