

Student Commencement Speaker
Angie McCarthy '19
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Hello, my name is Angie McCarthy.

I am proud to serve as your graduation speaker today to help us say goodbye. I am excited to leave Midd to the classes below us. They will make the same mistakes as us, and more, and both Midd and they will be better for it. They just have to make it out of the Battell bathtubs without pink eye first.

First and foremost, congrats class of 2019. We are the last class to remember the mods, the Proctor plates of color, the CFA, the bookstore selling books, life before Charles Murray. We have survived this place that is both idyllic, inspiring, and capable of turning up the mental and emotional heat that only the likes of Upstairs Proc is capable of. This all comes with a name tag that very few people know; no, Sean Kingston, this is not Millsbury.

Four years ago, I couldn't have envisioned standing up here with you now. I did not think that I would be giving this speech on this stage. As a first year, I called my big brother while walking this path and told him that I wanted to transfer. Middlebury was hard. *Winter* was hard. More than the weather, I didn't feel like I fit into this greater vision of what it means to be a "MiddKid." It seemed like everyone spent their high school careers name-dropping classical philosophers, and they also happened to design a bridge in their hometown that was not only environmentally sustainable but also engaged the local moose community in building it. I was scared of my classmates. I felt like I was a fluke. My brother told me: proximity was everything. I just had to get a little closer. Like all big brothers and broken clocks, sometimes they are right. When I look at this path now, I see four years of magic.

Proximity gave me the perspective that some of my classmates, despite being national orchestra level violinists or already credited on scientific papers, also ate the stickers on apples or drove with fake skeletons in the front seat of their car.

But proximity also got me to student leadership panels, a cappella concerts, IM soccer games, Quidditch matches, symposium talks—where I would whisper to myself, “People are so good at things.” I was—and still am—utterly enchanted with all of you. We got into Midd because some overworked admissions fellow thought that we had the shine. Well I am here to tell you, after four years of getting close, I still see that shine.

However, rubbing the veneer off of our passions, I’ve noticed a narrative at Middlebury, this emphasis on our chasing an abstract idea of “being the best.”

During the senior year job scramble, my peers wondered about their impact. There was anxiety that they couldn’t just work a job that paid the bills, but that they must start this high-flying career, of living up to this expensive degree of ours! We should all work at Goldman or get into Columbia Med or Harvard Law. They were afraid to become teachers or park rangers, because Midd produces “Greats,” as if being the best and being a changemaker are the same thing. Here’s what I’m afraid of: by chasing this caricature of what the best “Great” looks like, we lose sight of what a good human should be. When trying to achieve “world change” for the sake of being important and for achievement, we end up with admission scandals where privileged white kids go to college for fun and to say that they did, while students of color and first-gen students have to routinely defend their right to attend four-year institutions. But that doesn’t impact Midd, right?

Those same people who worried about their future impact, they’re the ones who went to every campus talk because they wanted to hear perspectives that challenged theirs and, more importantly, who baked monkey bread for their residence halls when people were stressed. They don’t see their impact, their generosity, their kindness in the same lens that they view this nebulous concept of achievement, because it seems so very far away. And I think that is a shame. Because the world needs more good people, like what I have seen here, than it does folks who only care for making a dime or a superficial name for themselves.

This school is too old, and this campus too handicap-inaccessible to not have attracted and produced some big names, forming this powerful old boys’ club.

But I'm going to say something controversial here: in an era of radical dissent and polarization, I find myself not caring if the person next to me in line is going to be the future attorney general. As Midd students, we all have a healthy level of cynicism regarding the future. If I based my reality on academic papers and UN reports alone, I'd think the world is going up in flames (according to Bill Nye it is though). All of these experts, handing off the baton (or cane, in this case) saying, "It's up to your generation to fix the world's problems." How am I, with my entry-level job—in a field that I don't want to stay in—supposed to change the world?

Mary Oliver's *North Country* helps us understand how: "You listen and you know—you could live a better life than you do, be—softer, kinder. And maybe this year you will—be able to do it." After that, it's proximity. And, knowing it isn't just up to me.

Our mission statement implores us to lead consequential lives—and I hope that we do not forget that how we define a life of consequence shows what we think has worth. You do not have to have a parking spot with your name on it to be great. It started with you learning Proctor lady's name, Crysta, and treating her with dignity and continues with you knowing that if you make six figures, you can probably tip your servers more than five percent—because of trickle-down economics. It started with you going to white ally meetings and advocating for the decolonization of our curriculum, and continues with you voting, marching, petitioning, and standing up for what is right. And potentially hardest of all, you must realize that you belonged here, and you deserve this piece of paper. The value that you put out into the world begins with the value that you see in yourself.

Everyone likes to say during graduation speeches things that we are onto bigger and better things. But I hope that's not true. I hope we continue to find the small things—just like we have here. Those impromptu friend dates at Atwater. The small, slushy slide down Mead Chapel Hill that you miraculously survive. Continue to find those small things, and where the road takes us won't seem as meaningless or soulless. Or at least that is my hope for those of us going into finance.

So, let me end with something similar to what my brother told me four years ago on this very

path. Get close. Get really close. Get close to the pain, your privileges, to your communities, get close enough to be the change we'll need. We cannot remain impartial and unmoved if we hope to be great, or good. If we have learned how to be proximate, notice details in the most humble of places, then potentially we can answer Mary Oliver's question "Tell me, what it is you plan to do—with your one wild and precious life?" I have no doubt that you will do great things one day, but I hope you will all be good humans every day too.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege to get close these past four years—congrats, Class of 2019, roll pant.