

## **Graduate student speech**

### **Joanna Helm, M.S. '14**

Not only has OHSU given me the extraordinary honor to speak on behalf of the graduate students today, but they have also given me weeks of fear and nausea at the thought of giving this speech that has made me lose weight. So really - it is a win-win situation!

I never dreamed I would be speaking at a commencement- and frankly, I feel like a vegetarian walking into Lardo, a bit out of place. Now give me a patient and ask me to calculate a TPN order, I can do that, no problem. But giving a speech makes me nervous. Nervous, because I know that I am supposed to say something meaningful. Give you good advice for you to always remember. But I usually try not to give advice, nutrition recommendations yes, advice- not so much. So, how about a story instead?

Last week I biked to class. My legs were feeling strong and I decided to climb up Hamilton St., I'd get a few extra minutes of cardio in, and challenge myself a little, instead of taking the bike lane on Terwilliger. Have you ever walked or driven up Hamilton- I know some of you *have* biked it and you know exactly what I am talking about—it is a brutal climb. I am about 1/2 up when my quads start screaming, I question if my mitochondria are actually making ATP, my heart is punching through my ribs, I swear both tires have gone flat and I think – Why is OHSU up on this hill?

Granted it does provide us with amazing views, moments of awe as we touch the clouds that cover the city below and it offers sunrises worthy of a 5 am wake up call - But I was thinking that morning as I turned little circles with my pedals attempting to keep my forward momentum up that 60 degree slope– Maybe we climb this hill every day because we are the ones who have the fortitude, perseverance, and stamina to make it to the top?

As I crest the final rise on this climb, I pause between the old buildings on campus. These are my favorite - especially the ones with brick walls. I am reminded of a statement by Randy Pausch –the

computer science professor from Carnegie Melon who passed a few years ago from pancreatic cancer. During his “Last Lecture”, he said: “Brick walls are there for a reason. The brick walls are not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to show how badly we want something. Because the brick walls are there to stop the people who don’t want something badly enough. They are there to keep out the *other* people.”

My dad was a marine so he understood about getting to the top of hills and breaking through brick walls. Always pushing and pulling me along, he has been my motivation, my compass. His favorite quote to us kids was - “Pain is just weakness leaving your body– you are stronger than you think you are and can do anything you want, you just can’t do *everything*. You don’t receive respect, you earn it. You aren’t given an opportunity, you fight for it.”

I think of this hill, Pill Hill, the Ivory Tower, - whatever you want to call it – this is our brick wall. How many people traveled thousands of miles, forded rivers and arrived at the bottom of this hill just to look up and say “it’s too steep”? The hill made the decision for them to go another direction. But not us. We are here because we persevered; we pushed through even when every molecule in our bodies said “stop”. That strength of mind, will power, and raw desire did not just push you up the hill where you have had such success over the years, it has also silently pulled you along at times when you were nearing exhaustion.

Our journeys here, each unique, are incredible stories- I know each of you fought in some way to get where you are now: poised with a very expensive yet invaluable paper stating your hard earned degree in which you will be using to start your careers. The story of how you made it up this hill, how you have succeeded – this is one of the stories you will tell the rest of your life. Your story is unique-. And it does not end here today.

As you go on to new careers, don’t let your story go silent – – it weaves the pieces of who you are into an elegant tapestry. I encourage you to listen closely to the stories of others. Every patient you meet, every family member you console, every child’s hand you hold, every colleague you spend countless hours with- they all have

their own stories. Honor these- listen- be humbled- and you may hear a story not unlike your own – one of perseverance, fortitude and someone who is willing to climb the hills and scale brick walls to get what they want- just like you.

To our friends and family who have traveled from Maine, Malaysia and beyond to be here today, I would like to say thank you - for it is because of your support, encouragement and dedication you cheer with us today to celebrate our success. And to the class of 2014, you have all earned my respect and deepest gratitude. Congratulations to each of you.