



Wheels to Keep Us Moving

BY SARA NIELSON, '11

During the past three years, I've been a quiet, diligent student. I tried not to bother too many people. I didn't speak in class unless spoken to. So I wasn't surprised when I heard the rumor that I had been chosen to speak today, because some people at the Law School were under the impression that I couldn't actually talk and saw this occasion as their last chance to confirm it. In my defense, I've spent the last three years surrounded by 150 people who know—full-on know—deep down in their hearts and spirits that they are right about everything. And they are dying for the chance to prove it vocally.

Those of you who have lived with or around a law student can attest that it's hard to get a word in. So, I'm honored to have this chance to speak, and if anyone behind me raises their hand and wants to make a point that they think has been overlooked, I'm going to ignore them.

As an undergrad at BYU, I worked in this concert hall as a stage manager. I worked events like this one, and many times I had to move grand pianos back and forth across the stage during a performance. More often than not, after I finished my moving and got the piano into place, I received a modest bit of applause from the audience. I think people were genuinely amazed that I didn't push the piano right off the edge of the stage. More likely, they were amazed that I was able to move it at all, being

so small and pathetic. Many times people would make comments like, “I don’t know how you manage to move those pianos around so easily. They’re so heavy.” My response was always the same: “They’re on wheels. I mean, the pianos have nice wheels. I’m not carrying them on my back.”

A similar thing has often happened over the past three years. I tell people that I’m in law school, and then I have to spend some time convincing them that I’m actually studying to be a lawyer and not a court

reporter or a 911 dispatcher, but an actual lawyer. But once I have them convinced, they usually say, “Oh, law school sounds so difficult. I don’t know how you do it, being so small and pathetic.” Oh, and they usually say, “Bless your heart,” a few times in there somewhere.

In addition to being mildly offensive, these people are right,

and I think my classmates would agree with me that for the past three years we have all been struggling with something that’s too heavy and awkward to manage alone. But I don’t know anyone who has done it alone. We have had spouses, friends, children, parents, siblings, neighbors, and each other. In short, over the past three years, we all have had people in our lives, wheels to keep us moving. I think many of them are here tonight.

So while I know that graduates often need words of hope

and praise on this big day and that messages of repaying debts and doing good in the world have their place, the message I bring to you today is one of gratitude—not just of gratitude in today’s moment but as a continuing part of life. From this group on stage will emerge talented, successful, competent attorneys working and serving in many places and in many fields. They will run businesses, whole states, banks, homes, classrooms, and much more. But if I have to give advice today, it is this: when you reach these heights and along the way, don’t imagine that you did it on your own. One of my favorite poets, Walt Whitman wrote that pursuing self-sufficiency kills gratitude. I think he is right. In all your success, I hope you can allow yourself to need other people and acknowledge them for what they are: the wheels that keep you moving.

But for today, I know that my classmates are all feeling grateful, not just to be done (which, rest assured, they are feeling), but grateful for you—you as groups and as individuals.

Now, of course it’s impossible for every graduate to get to say what he or she is feeling tonight, but if they could, if given a chance, I think most of them would have a similar message. For instance, I asked Autumn Begay, a woman whose quiet strength I admire, what she would say today. Here it is:

First and foremost, I want to thank my wonderful husband, Jeremy. Hun, your encouragement and support have been steadfast. Through all the late nights studying and weekends consumed in school, you were my greatest support and strength. You carried me through the rough spots and championed my successes. This journey has been as much yours as it has been mine. I love you.

To my sweet little Elijah, you were literally with me in class from day one of your existence. Your birth and sweet spirit have brought me perspective and joy.

Mom and Dad Smith, you have always made me feel that I could aspire to great heights. Thank you for all of your love and your support. Your encouragement throughout my life has meant so much.

Mom and Dad Begay and all of the Begay clan: that you are here today means so much to me. Your excitement for me fills my heart with joy. Finally, my wonderful classmates, I don’t know how to express how grateful I am to you. You each are so amazing and inspiring. I truly treasure your friendships. We have come a long way together from that first nerve-racking day at law school. I want you to know how much I admire and respect you. Thank you!

I asked my friend Tyler LaMarr (who was the first person who showed me how to really study) what he would say today, and, being a man of few words, he said this:

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for teaching me about the things that are so much more important than law school, and thank you, Yumi and Naomi, who are my most important things.

Finally, I asked Rachel Miller, someone whose kindness I have admired and benefited from since our first semester. She asked me to say this:

Mom and Dad – I owe it all to you. I was incredibly lucky to grow up in a terrific Idaho home where reading, thinking, and discussing was the family evening routine. The lessons of hard work, integrity, and faith I learned at home have become the bedrock of my academic success and future

aspirations. No matter what age or degree I attain, you will always be my loving and wise parents, whose examples I will try to follow. Love you, Mom and Dad. Thanks for everything!

It would be lovely if we could go on until each graduate got to say to their families and supporters what I know they’re thinking. But some of us are probably getting hungry and want to move this thing along. But while I have your attention, I hope you will forgive me and indulge me while I say some thanks of my own.

When I started law school, my husband had recently passed away, and I was lost. But I came here with my son, and we started something new, something that my husband wanted for us. My parents gave up two years of retirement to help me through it. I could not have finished one week, let alone three years, without them or the rest of my family. Thank you.

Those are the people that kept me moving at home. It took a whole other set of people to keep me going at school. I think this group saw, right away, how lost and broken I was, and they carried me. They let a tiny, weird little widow join their group and learn from them. After three years I think of them as brothers—brilliant, evil, genius brothers, whom I don’t want to see or talk to for at least two weeks. Thank you.

Finally, I want to thank my son, Luke. He has put up with a lot in the last three years and will likely put up with more. Luke, you are my favorite person in the whole world, and I’m going to keep working to prove it to you every day.

To my classmates, thank you all and congratulations.

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