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Serve First. Lead Second.

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Saturday December 14, 2019

University of Dayton President Eric Spina shares words of advice from the Class of 2019 in his remarks at winter commencement.

Good morning! And what a joyous morning!

Congratulations to the Class of 2019. Take a deep breath. Pause. Exhale. And let the realization of this moment wash over you. You. Did. It!

I offer a special welcome to all of our families, particularly those who traveled far — even from overseas — to share this moment. I can feel your happiness, your pride, and yes, even a little bit of relief. This day is *finally* here! This is a day you'll always remember and cherish.

Graduates, will you please rise, face your family members and friends, and give them a rousing round of applause for their support and love that made this day possible!

Some of you are first-generation college graduates. You personify the American dream, and you will continue to open doors of opportunity — not just for yourselves, but for future generations of your family. We're so proud of you AND so proud of the family members who

made your dream — and theirs — come true.

Let's have a special round of applause for all the first-generation college graduates and their families!

Members of the faculty and staff: Thank *you* for creating an environment that has allowed these about-to-be graduates to stretch themselves academically, to dream big, to dare to be great. You have prepared them to use their education and faith to make a difference — a real difference — in a world hungry for their community-building skills and innovative thinking.

I'd also like to take a moment and give special recognition to four extraordinary scholars — all women — who are earning their doctorates in theology today. Nationally, women make up just one-third of all doctoral degree holders in religion and theology. This is quite a noteworthy accomplishment for these graduates and speaks highly of the inclusivity of our program. Congratulations!

It's always a challenge to find the right words to share at commencement. Commencement speakers, including me, strive to find words that touch the heart and soul. Words that resonate years later. Words to live by. Words that will matter to you.

This year, I didn't look very far to find a muse. I just asked some members of the Class of 2019 for advice on what you might want to hear.

Computer engineering major Matt Gnacek suggested I reflect on Blessed William Joseph Chaminade's observation about how hard it is to accept — and embrace — change. Blessed Chaminade, the founder of the Marianists, once uttered this unfortunate truth: "Never has change been done and never will it be done without difficulty."

All of you, like Matt, want to use your University of Dayton education to do something big, something meaningful, in life. That will, inevitably, involve taking prudent risks, meeting challenges head on, and having the courage, on occasion, to take a leap of faith. It will require critical thinking skills and a heart that's open to the possibilities in a future that's unknown.

The great humanitarian and leader Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." I challenge you to emulate Blessed Chaminade and Gandhi and **use your degree to make a difference in a world that *needs* change.**

It won't be easy, but leading change with conviction and courage will bring great purpose and meaning to your lives. *Leading change with conviction and courage will bring great purpose and meaning to your lives.*

And who better to lead change than graduates of this Marianist university, where we educate students for adaptation and change? I know that you will help to shape a more hopeful future for us.

Why am I so confident of that?

Because in many ways, your class is already doing that.

Just this past summer, mechanical engineering majors Ellen Lucchesi and Michael Fornadel spent 10 weeks in La Paz, Bolivia, where they worked with an organization that makes low-cost prosthetics for amputees. In the process of providing new legs — and new hope — to amputees, they found their own lives transformed.

“Every field of work can contribute to the common good,” says Ellen. “If you can make something better, why would you not make the world a better place?” asks Michael.

And that leads to my second challenge: **Use your education to create a more just future for all.** Work across differences in diverse communities on meaningful issues. Be a partner for the common good.

As a University of Dayton graduate, you have a special obligation to use your learning, your curiosity, and your faith in a way that will transform your life and the lives of others for the better. Accept that responsibility willingly and joyfully.

Finally, I challenge you to **“serve first and lead second.”** *Serve first and lead second.* That’s the lesson Mike Nichols, a 1998 UD bachelor’s degree graduate, says he learned when he enrolled in the MBA@Dayton program. He’s one of 69 MBA students graduating today, mostly from that high-profile, high-impact online program.

As Mike and his classmates honed the finer points of business strategy in their MBA classes, they also learned what it means to improve the world around them. Research shows that organizations that practice servant-leadership are more successful. The program’s required servant-leadership immersion weekend in Dayton had a profound impact on Mike’s life, making him realize more fully what it means to be a community builder.

I cherish the poignant words he wrote in an email to me: “I sit here now, on the cusp of my second degree from this great institution, and wonder if God led me back to UD to build upon my education, but more importantly to fill that missing piece — that sense of community — that endearing love for what this University family and its founders emulate.”

After living and learning at this Catholic, Marianist university with its dedication to social justice, with its special focus on building community, with its commitment to preparing you to work across differences, I know that — just like Matt, Ellen, Michael, and Mike — you will enter the world prepared to change it.

It’s not just because your résumé is strong, though it is. It’s not just because you are armed with marketable skills, though you are. It’s not just because you hold a college degree or two or three, though you do — proudly.

It's because you have lived and learned in community — and have already shown you can make a positive difference with the way you live your lives inside and outside the classroom. Every moment on your academic journey has shaped you into the person you are today.

Please remember that the University of Dayton will always be an important part of you, and you will always be part of this special campus community. This will always be your home.

I have full confidence you will be successful in all the ways that matter. I know our country and society will benefit from your expertise and efforts, your compassion and community-building skills, your faith and fortitude.

Members of the class of 2019, congratulations on all your accomplishments. I cannot wait to see how you will change the world.

Thank you.