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## Always Say Yes!

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# Always Say Yes! : University of Dayton, Ohio

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Sunday May 7, 2023

## Always Say Yes!

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By Eric F. Spina

Good morning CLASS OF 2023!! And what a joyous morning it is!

Congratulations to each and every one of you! Now....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 — especially those 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!

We'd like to invite all graduating service members, student veterans, and commissioned cadets to stand and be recognized for your service and leadership.

I'd also like to offer a heartfelt welcome to the family of Ben Tavella, a courageous mechanical engineering student with muscular dystrophy who died during his first year on campus doing what he loved — pursuing his dream of a UD diploma. While he is not here with us physically, he will forever be a member of the Class of 2023 and will live in our hearts forever.

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.

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, the graduates.

As I considered what I would say this year, it struck me that the loss of two beloved UD figures — one a student, the other a professor — offer powerful, life-affirming lessons for all of us, but particularly for you, our new graduates.

If we could choreograph life, Ben Tavella (or Benny, as his family and friends called him) would be sitting in a wheelchair today among the engineering graduates, proudly dressed in his cap and gown, smiling from ear to ear. To cheers, he would wheel to the front of the stage to receive his diploma. For those who lived with Benny in Founders Hall, none of you would be the least bit surprised if he turned on the chair's LED lights, turning it into a moving disco ball, for this auspicious occasion.

And in the faculty section, Dr. Anne Crecelius, a brilliant, young scholar and professor here at UD, would be ready to bound out of her seat to hug health and sport science graduates. It wasn't that long ago that she received her own undergraduate degree in exercise science from UD. Just three months ago, Dr. C, as her students affectionately called her, died after a long and courageous journey with breast cancer. She was 37.

I dare say few people lived with such joy and accomplished so much in so few days on Earth as Dr. C and Benny. They both viewed life as a grand adventure to be deeply enjoyed and savored. Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, they said “yes” even in the face of insurmountable odds. Most of you will never face those kind of odds at a young age, thankfully. As my commencement charge to you today, I urge you to emulate the way that Dr. C and Benny lived and cultivate a “YES” mindset. If you do so, you will foster courage, resolve, and inner resilience that will allow you to bounce back from life’s inevitable disappointments and move toward fulfillment. When you say YES, you will view life through the lens of optimism and faith — and you will open up your lives to possibilities and opportunities beyond what you can imagine today.

As you enter your professions, graduate school, military service, or a year of community service, **always say yes**. Find what you love — and use your gifts to make a difference in the world. Don’t be dissuaded by the naysayers who say it’s out of vogue to be peacemakers in a world torn by conflict, or who tell you the odds are too great that you will ever be part of a team that develops life-saving treatments for muscular dystrophy or advanced cancer. Others may dismiss your concern for the environment, what Pope Francis calls caring for “our common home.” **Pursue what is noble, meaningful, right, and just anyway. Say yes. Always say yes.**

Think of Benny, who entered UD with an ACT of 34 — higher than virtually 99 percent of all test takers in the country. He stood out for his brilliance, but he also stood out because he attended class in a wheelchair. On our campus, known for its welcoming spirit, his classmates readily befriended and accepted him. His RA Drew Moyer noted at a prayer service in the chapel after Benny’s death, “Not a single person saw Ben as any less of a person (because he was in a wheelchair). They included him in everything they did, and he was a true college student. It was one of the coolest things to see when people my age come around someone who might seem different on the outside, and (they do not care about the difference).” All they saw was a funny, outgoing, and very smart person.”

Your ability to recognize and value difference will allow you to widen your circle of friends to include people from all walks of life, grow in your humanity, and leverage positive change. In the workplace, you will succeed beyond expectations because research shows that diverse teams — diverse in multiple ways — are more creative, more innovative, more engaged, and more successful. **In the Marianist way, always treat others with dignity, respect, and love. Embrace difference. Say yes. Always say yes.**

Like Benny, Dr. C showed up no matter the extent of her illness, regardless the level of her pain, despite the seriousness of her diagnosis. She taught with energy and passion, bringing her cancer diagnosis and treatment options into the classroom because she saw a way to drive home important lessons — about physiology and about living life. A true faculty mentor, she worked side by side with some of you in her lab, and more than a few of you co-authored research studies with her. She led study-abroad trips, displaying what one friend called her

“lovable, fierce, exuberant, audacious sense of adventure.” In the final months of her life, she embarked on an African safari, went hiking and white water rafting with her siblings, and took a river cruise with her mom and sisters to visit Europe’s Christmas markets. Even under home hospice care, she participated in Zoom calls with colleagues working together to help the University chart a strategic path forward. Under the Marianist philosophy, we educate the “whole person” — mind, body, spirit — to prepare students to live lives of great purpose. Dr. C led a life of great meaning, and she showed up — even on the most difficult days. She never did anything halfway. That’s the great lesson of her life. **Find your purpose. Find your joy — and show up. Say yes. Always say yes.**

Benny and Dr. C also taught us how to cherish the gifts we have been given. They were deeply, joyfully engaged in the life of UD despite serious, life-threatening challenges. One night Benny challenged eight guys who lived on his floor to a race back to Founders from the student neighborhood. He cranked his motorized wheelchair up to full power and beat them as they arrived exhausted and laughing. In another instance, a professor in Benny’s Comm 100 class offered him the opportunity to share his speech before just her, not the entire class, because it was hard for him to project his voice. He wouldn’t hear of it. Like Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, founder of the Marianists, no obstacle fazed him. Remember Blessed Chaminade’s words: *“I am like a brook that makes no effort to overcome obstacles in its way. All the obstacles can do is hold me up for a while, as a brook is held up; but during that time it grows broader and deeper and after a while it overflows the obstruction and flows along again. This is how I am going to work.”* That’s the great lesson of Benny’s life. **Be persistent in the face of adversity. Say yes. Always say yes.**

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 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, though you do — proudly.

It’s because you have learned life lessons beyond the textbook. As you imagine and shape your future, I urge you to dream boldly, act with conviction, and lean into the moment. Keep moving forward, without fear, toward lives of great purpose and service. **Say yes. Always say yes.**

As your president — and as a representative of the UD faculty, staff, vowed religious, Board of Trustees, and all of Flyer Nation — I salute you and your accomplishments in this moment of human need and across your time as a University of Dayton student.

I leave you with Dr. C’s final words to us on her blog: “Please take care of each other.”

Congratulations, Class of 2023! May God bless you and keep you in his grace.

Go, Flyers!