

To the members of the Class of 2016 and our family, friends, supporters, and leaders--

I am honored to be able to stand in front of all of you and be given the opportunity to speak today. For four years we have worked together to build something remarkable, and I could not be prouder of what we've accomplished.

As many of you know, I'm from a small town in Addison County, Vermont. When I say small, I don't mean Saratoga small-- I mean we have one stoplight, and our trash is picked up by a team of horses and a wagon every Friday.

When I was growing up, I never really appreciated the value and beauty of my hometown. Sure, I loved watching the mountains fade from white to green in May as the lilacs bud up, and the smell of woodsmoke every winter morning as people fired up their woodstoves before heading off to work. I loved the long summer days spent with my brother making up our own worlds as we ran through the woods, only returning home if we got hungry or if we fell in the river and needed new clothes, as we inevitably did every year, no matter how many times we were told to be careful.

But still, I didn't really quite grasp that this place was special until I left to come here, to go to college. It came in little moments when I would smile at a stranger and they would look confused, and I would remember that people don't usually do that here. I missed the woodsmoke, I missed the mountains at my back, turning orange and pink when the sun set, and the dirt roads turning every lost car trying to find Route 7 a chalky brown.

As human beings, we yearn for home. It's natural and everyone does it. But the thing no one tells you is that you can have more than one home. And while I will never lose my love for my Vermont home, I have made another home right here in Saratoga.

I feel at home when I walk into my apartment and see my housemates clustered around the kitchen counter, eating Wintergreen Lifesavers and laughing at whatever stupid thing one of us just said. I feel at home when I see the light in my classmate's eyes when they speak about their passion, whether that's politics or social justice or analytical chemistry. I felt it embracing friends after Thanksgiving break, holding each other as tightly as if we had been apart for years rather than five days. I felt it when I sat in the lounge of Penfield my freshman year and cheered as Barack Obama won his second term, propelled by a crowd of first time voters like the ones surrounding me. I've learned a lot here, and not just in the classroom: meeting people from new states and new backgrounds and new countries has shown me that there's more than one way to build your home, but as long as you do it with intention and openness you can't be faulted. And in a way, I think that my two homes have undeniable parallels; now, instead of falling into rivers when we clearly knew better, my brother and I spend our afternoons frantically trying to catch up on the torrents of work we put off until a little too late. While mountains may no longer rise at my back, I know my classmates do stand tall and immovable when they see injustice and wrongdoing in the world.

Building a home at Skidmore doesn't mean I don't miss the woodsmoke or the silence of a frigid winter morning, clear and crisp and bright, or the sound of my mother's voice asking me if I

want to go on a walk. Those memories and feelings are just as beautiful to me now as they always have been. I guess what I'm saying is, appreciate the homes you build while you're still building them. Open yourself up and let the feeling rush in; smile at a stranger, speak your truth even when it terrifies you, look up at the sky every morning and think about what your purpose is. These little moments in a place are what make it a home, what you'll think about years from now when you're trying to go to sleep and can't quite get there. And I like to think that every stranger I smile at might spread that smile like a ripple across a Vermont pond when a tousle-haired blond kid carelessly throws a pebble from the road in, and maybe it just makes someone a little happier and maybe it doesn't but regardless, you tried and put something positive out into the world.

So wherever you end up after this moment, I want you to think about the homes you build. Any place you spend time in can be a home for you, so make it one. Maybe it will be a tiny apartment in a city far from here, or the place you work, or maybe it won't be a physical place but rather the smile of someone you love. Appreciate these homes while you have them, and let this world grow a little brighter. Thank you!