

Commencement December 2012

On behalf of the Bellarmine University Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, and alumni, it is my great pleasure to congratulate you on the successful achievement of your respective Bellarmine degree programs! It also is my great privilege now to officially welcome you into the distinguished company of more than 20,000 alumnae and alumni throughout the world who constitute the Bellarmine University Alumni Association!

Congratulations as well to David Armstrong and Brad Ray on your well-deserved degrees, and thank you, David, for sharing your wise and encouraging words. Congratulations as well to our distinguished and beloved colleague, former Provost John Oppelt, on receiving the Horrigan Medal, and may your Baltimore Orioles win the World Series next year!

We are very happy for each and every one of you and very proud of you on the occasion of this very significant moment in your lives. We also are keenly aware of the fact that to get to this great moment, many of you have faced some formidable challenges in your life.

We know, therefore, not only that you are very bright and good human beings, but also that you are strong, resilient, imaginative, creative, organized, and determined – and at an exceptionally high level.

To support that assertion, allow me to briefly comment on just three among you:

Today, Kathleen Gallagher graduates with a major in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. Her first semester here was seven years ago in Fall 2005. At the end of her sophomore year, she joined the National Guard. Her patriotism and commitment to service led her to volunteer for two 9-month deployments: one in Iraq, from Fall 2008 to Fall 2009; and one in Afghanistan, from Spring 2011 to Spring 2012. Between these two missions, she came back to Bellarmine for two terms to continue work on her degree, and still completed her major program in 8 semesters. Her future goal is to attend medical school.

Please join me in thanking Kathleen for her courage and service to our nation, and in congratulating her on her Bellarmine degree.

In your Bellarmine education, we encourage you not only to successfully complete your degree programs, but to use your Bellarmine degree as the foundation for continuing to learn throughout your lives, for life-long learning.

Of course, Carl Jankowski has demonstrated that even pursuing your Bellarmine degree can involve life-long learning.

In a few minutes, I will be delighted to hand a Bellarmine diploma to Carl Jankowski who graduates today with a degree in Business Administration, more than 40 years after

starting his undergraduate education. Carl is a Wisconsin native and resident who took a work assignment in Louisville in the 1960's. He began taking adult evening classes at Bellarmine in Fall 1966, but was transferred to a new position out of town before he could finish his program here.

After a successful career in business and human resources, last summer he got in touch with us to see how he might complete his degree, a project on his "bucket list." We determined that he was just nine credits short of a business degree. Working with the Dean and faculty of the Rubel School, he followed the University's process for evaluating the academic learning equivalency of his business and life experience, and was awarded six hours of portfolio credit. To complete his final three credits, we agreed that he could achieve that by successfully completing a fine arts course at a community college near his Wisconsin home. He completed the Theater course, had a great time in the process, and tonight, Wisconsin's and now Bellarmine's own Carl Jankowski, a mere 77 years young, will receive his diploma from Bellarmine University!

Finally, I wish to acknowledge Sarah Dudley, who is receiving her bachelor's degree in Biology. Sarah transferred to Bellarmine from Hanover College in a wheelchair after suffering paralysis during a medical procedure during her freshman year. Determined not to take a break from college, she attended therapy every morning before classes, carried a full course load, and sometimes attended the physical therapy clinic at Bellarmine. After her sophomore year, Sarah had a major health setback and was in the hospital for 10 weeks. She dropped her full-time fall class schedule but stayed enrolled in one class, which she completed from the hospital and from home.

At one point, Sarah could not even hold a pencil or pen. She depended on student volunteers to take notes for her in classes, to write her dictated answers for exams, and to assist her around campus as needed. Sarah continued going to therapy every day in hopes of improving her physical capabilities. Not only did she receive support from her fellow students, but she recently sent me a beautiful letter to make sure that I knew how much she benefitted from the support of our faculty and staff, most notably Ms. Ronda Purdy, Dr. Steve Wilt, and Dr. Joe Sinksi. Sarah's resolve and perseverance through this trying time is evidenced by the fact that (1) she has completed the requirements for her Biology degree; and (2) this evening, she will walk across this stage to accept her Bellarmine degree.

Neither military service in war time, nor the challenge of life-long learning amidst a successful business career in several states, nor formidable challenges to physical health could keep these graduates from successfully completing their Bellarmine degrees.

I am aware that stories like these are replicated in many variations on similar themes in the lives of many of you, most likely most of you here this evening. So please join me, one more time, in giving a round of applause to yourselves and to each and every member of the Bellarmine University Class of 2012!

This evening, I know that each of us also carries in our thoughts and prayers our brothers and sisters in the Newtown, Connecticut community who, with the entire nation, suffered an unspeakable tragedy last Friday in which many very young students, as well as several faculty and staff, lost their lives.

Our prayers for the victims of this event, and their families and friends, are that they will be fully open to the grace that God gives us to meet the challenges that occur from time to time in our human experience.

I am grateful to Dr. Bob Cooter, Dean of Bellarmine's Annsley Frazier Thornton School of Education, where we work to educate, among others, teachers of six and seven year old children, as well as principals of elementary schools – for his suggestion that as gesture of solidarity with those who have suffered and continue to suffer in this matter, and given the commitment of the Bellarmine University community to living lives full of love and loving, and confident in the ultimate triumph of love over violence and death – that we wear green ribbons this evening, the favorite color of murdered grade school teacher Vicki Soto. Green also is a poignant Christian symbol of hope, and that further amplifies the meaning of our ribbon.

Drawing from the resilience and strength of the three fellow graduates mentioned a moment ago, and from the courage and the triumph of love evidenced in such moving ways by our neighbors in Newtown, Connecticut – let us go forward tonight, confident in our belief that a Bellarmine education, rooted in the liberal arts, and in skills that help you to think clearly and create great meaning and value in your life – and in our commitment to loving lives and to the enormous power within each of us.

You have the strength, creativity, and resilience not only to survive, but to prevail, to meet the challenges in your life head on and successfully – as you not only make your way in the world, but, using your gifts to serve others, also help to make the world a better place.

Our friend, Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk whose philosophy, values, and words inform the inclusive Catholic identity of Bellarmine has said that: "We already have (within us) what we seek. It is there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us."

So, Class of 2012, I give you my charge to confidently go forth into the world from this wonderful place called Bellarmine, and being aware of what you have, what already is within you – to successfully find what you seek.

As now you are alumnae and alumni of Bellarmine University, the faculty, staff, and I look forward to keeping in touch with you over the years, and to welcoming you and seeing you every time you return to visit your Alma Mater – which we hope will be often.

Congratulations, Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and Godspeed.

Dr. Joseph J. McGowan
President