

Commencement December 2013

On behalf of Bellarmine University's Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, and alumni, it is my great pleasure to congratulate you on the successful achievement of your respective Bellarmine degrees! It also is my great privilege to officially welcome you into the distinguished company of over 22,000 alumnae and alumni throughout the world who constitute the Bellarmine University Alumni Association!

Congratulations, as well, to my good friend and presidential colleague, the Rev. Dr. Kevin Cosby on your well-deserved honorary degree! On behalf of the entire Bellarmine family, thank you for your great leadership and service to our community through higher education and ministry, and for encouraging all of us to continue to seek the Light through learning and worship.

Class of 2013, I know many of you have family members here tonight to celebrate this very personal and important occasion with you. Your Bellarmine family and I also are very proud of each and every one of you for achieving this significant milestone in your life. Attaining a Bellarmine degree takes great intelligence, energy, dedication, discipline and hard work. In many cases, it also requires the flexibility, creativity, and resilience to change your mind, change course, and take reasonable risks, while seeking new adventures.

I'd like to take a few minutes to share with you the stories of six of the members of your class who have done and are doing just that:

Andy Dyson, graduating with a major in Liberal Studies and a minor in Environmental Studies, is a non-traditional student in every sense of the term. He hails from Northumberland, in England, well known for its coal and famous caves. Its most recent claim is being home to the castle that served as the model for Hogwarts – in the Harry Potter movies! Andy attended but did not complete college in his younger years, and since then has been on a fascinating journey, working with youth programs in the city of Philadelphia, advocating for urban bicycling, and building custom bicycle frames. Recently, he also has kept the books at the Louisville Nature Center, while working on his degree at Bellarmine. With his bicycling advocacy, Andy uses his bicycle or the public bus system (or both) as his mode of transportation. He has petitioned TARC to add a line down Norris Place to better serve Bellarmine's campus, and I'm told that TARC has taken that proposal under consideration.

In Fall 2012, in a leap of faith, Andy enrolled in a new Bellarmine class called Geographic Information Systems, a digital mapping technology class that is part of the curriculum of our new School of Environmental Studies. He went on to take nearly all of the upper-level requirements for the Environmental Studies degree, making him among the first students in Bellarmine's history to minor in this new and growing program. So,

congratulations Andy, who will be handed his diploma in a little while with the help of his wife, Dr. Moira O’Keeffe, Assistant Professor in our School of Communication.

Russ Read came to Bellarmine from a successful career in television spanning three decades, from sales and programming to management. In his late 50s, he decided to go in a new direction, and started in our master’s in communication program. Through this program, he has strengthened his deep commitment to Catholic social justice by helping to establish the first Spanish-speaking Twelve-Step program to backside track workers at Churchill Downs. Russ is the first to tell you his Bellarmine experience has transformed his way of looking at the world, and has opened for him new avenues to serve those struggling with addiction. Well, done, Russ, and congratulations!

Tonya “Lynette” Clark started her Bellarmine journey in 1988. Life and love intervened prior to the completion of her degree – as she married and raised three children. She never lost her passion for education, however, and recently came back to Bellarmine to finish her degree. She graduates tonight with a degree in Liberal Studies. Julie Armstrong-Binnix, who taught Tonya in her IDC 401 class, says, “She’s setting a great example for her kids to persevere. Also, it’s been great having her perspective in my class of mainly 21-year-olds!” Tonya, your family and the rest of us cheer for you tonight. Congratulations!

Aaron Jahn graduates this evening with a Master’s Degree in Communication, and his journey has been most interesting. Aaron was a successful high school theology teacher when he decided to make a change. After attending an information session on Bellarmine’s Master of Arts in Communication program, he said that he was “filled with hope and came out of the session thinking, ‘It would only take two short years and I can start on a new path.’” Two short years later, he now has completed that program, as well as a communications internship at GE Appliances, and his experiences have opened new vistas. “This comprehensive education in communications and in personal competencies has led to a brighter future with unforeseeable possibilities,” he says. “I graduate with pride, confidence and a stronger sense of myself.” Congratulations, Aaron, and best wishes for every success in your new endeavors.

Robert “Robbie” Esterle is a graduate of Western Kentucky University – with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology. From a single-parent family that was struggling financially, Robbie joined the Army after his first year of college to help defray the cost of his education. His undergraduate education was interrupted for a couple years when he was deployed to Iraq for a year to serve in the armed forces. Once he graduated with his Bachelor of Science degree, he began to pursue a post-graduate career in physical therapy. After earning admission to the Bellarmine’s DPT class of 2013, he quickly earned the respect of his peers and was elected Class President. He has been a proud member of the United States Army Reserve since 2003, and currently serves as a Staff Sergeant. When notified by the Army last year during the spring term that he was going to be deployed again, his BU family was concerned and hoped to keep it from happening. But his reply was, “I don’t want to keep it from happening. It’s my duty.”

Robbie has been and continues to be an excellent ambassador for our DPT program, for the University, for the community, and for our nation! Robbie Esterle – congratulations!

Joseph Ward, an ROTC cadet, graduates tonight with a degree in Theology, serving God and Country if you will! He soon will receive his commission as a 2nd Lieutenant, Active Duty, in the United States Army. Major Surry and Master Sergeant Irwin join us tonight to help celebrate Joseph's graduation. Soon to be Lieutenant and now Bellarmine alumnus Joseph Ward, we salute you! Congratulations!

Bellarmino's trustees, faculty, staff and I are fully aware that every single student here this evening has his and her own inspiring and compelling success story. Please join me, therefore, and give yourselves a round of applause – as proud members of the Bellarmine University Class of 2013!

Thinking about those students who returned to Bellarmine to finish a degree after life presented its challenges, or who came to this university to prepare for an exciting new chapter in their lives, reminds me of recent wise words from author Neil Gaiman. Earlier this fall, Mr. Gaiman, a prolific author whose work encompasses the genres of prose, poetry, journalism, film, comics and more, delivered the annual lecture for the Reading Agency in London, a charity that changes lives by helping people to become better readers. In addressing the importance of reading fiction, Mr. Gaiman emphasized the role that fiction plays in expanding, energizing, and engaging the imagination. While unfortunately, some may dismiss using the imagination – and imagining – as a waste of time, this author believes very strongly that using one's imagination is absolutely essential for improving one's own life and circumstances and, further, to improving the condition of the world. In fact, he believes that we all have an obligation to imagine.

“It is easy to pretend that nobody can change anything; that we are in a world in which society is huge and the individual is less than nothing: an atom in a wall, a grain of rice in a rice field,” he said. “But the truth is, individuals change their world over and over, individuals make the future, and they do it by imagining that things can be different.”

We all agree that the graduates whose stories I shared with you this evening are using their imaginations. In the midst of challenging circumstances, they have imagined new possibilities. They dreamed new visions for themselves, and how their individual visions could energize and improve their lives. Now, in their new and renewed lives, they are in a better position to effect change in the lives of people, in our community, country, and world – and that is the Bellarmine spirit of impact and service at work!

Every graduate here tonight, of course, has similar capacity and potential. You have the gift and ability to imagine your future and realize it, to make a better world for yourself and others. With the knowledge, confidence, critical thinking skills, and values discovered and strengthened during your time at Bellarmine, the faculty and I strongly believe that now you are more than ready to fully engage with the world and to do what is in your power to change it and make it an even better place.

Congratulations to you, the newest alumnae and alumni of Bellarmine University! And Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and Godspeed!

Dr. Joseph J. McGowan
President