

Commencement May 2012

Congratulations! And now allow me to formally welcome each of you and all of you to the Bellarmine University Alumni Association, now including a distinguished group of over 20,000 women and men throughout the world! Knights Nation, indeed!

Because 555 of you graduate today, and 465 of you are here this afternoon to receive your diploma, there are a couple things I'd like to talk about. First, I'd like to give you a sense of the character of your graduating class by mentioning several among you who to me are representative of your amazing class.

Then toward the end, I'd like to share an encouragement with you as you depart from these hallowed halls of Bellarmine to go forth and make your way in the world – a world that very much needs all the Bellarmine-faculty-taught Bellarmine graduates it can get!

As 555 of you graduate today, the faculty and I are well aware that there are 555 wonderful stories in your 2012 class of undergraduate and graduate students. Here are a few of them:

Bellarmino encourages an international perspective and sophistication. Sarah Hoffeditz took this to heart. A member of the Honors Program, Sarah studied abroad in the Netherlands, traveled to India with Campus Ministries, visited Brazil twice, and also went to Italy, France, England, Germany, Austria, Belgium, and Ireland.

She also demonstrated Bellarmine's commitment to service as well, with three alternative spring break trips to Louisiana. She was the Residence Hall Association Hall Chair for the Sienas from 2009-2010. One of her many favorite international memories was watching the Bellarmine men's basketball team win the National Championship on a friend's computer in Munster, Germany.

Bellarmino welcomes students for whom college-going is a family tradition, and also students who today are the first in their families to receive a college diploma. In fact, 40% of each Bellarmine undergraduate class is comprised of students attending college for the first time in their families. We call this group our Pioneer Scholars.

Paige Wills and Cody Wuetcher are Communication majors and are great examples of what Pioneer Scholars students can do in four years.

Paige Wills is an accomplished student, athlete, and a veteran of internships. Paige wrote an essay for the Humana Foundation and Bellarmine's Institute for Media, Culture, and Ethics that won her a trip to the International Women in Media Foundation's Courage in Journalism Awards Ceremony in New York City. She has interned at Baptist Hospital East, Guthrie/Mayes Public Relations, AT&T and the Kentucky Derby Festival Morning Line Radio Show, and State Farm Insurance. She also interned at the Kentucky Derby Museum, worked on the red carpet at the Kentucky Derby, and attended the Winner's Circle Party after the race.

She played two years of NCAA Division II softball and was a two-year member of the Great Lakes Valley Academic All-Conference Team. She is a reporter for Bellarmine University's newspaper, The Concord. She also writes a blog for the Envelope Manufacturers Association, EMA. She spoke to 100 CEOs and top-level managers at the EMA's Fall Convention in Washington D.C. about her blog, paperviews.org, and the future of paper-based communication. She was on the Knight of Honor homecoming court and has been named Who's Who of College Students. She has also been on the Dean's list every semester and a member of the National Communication Honor Society, Lambda Pi Eta.

Cody Wuetcher is a semi-professional motor cross racer, a cattle farmer, a production assistant for local video companies and a first-generation college graduate. Beside tagging calves, mending fences and driving tractors, Cody is a fair hand with a lasso, is headed for the motor cross nationals, and is also part of the production staff at WDRB Fox News as a cameraman. He interned with the Scotty Davenport show for Bellarmine University during the national championship season, and with Sharp Entertainment, filming "Man Versus Food Nation" and "Extreme Couponing," which by lunch on the first day turned into a job as a Production Assistant. Cody has also runs his own lawn care and landscaping company.

Bellarmino encourages our students not only to deepen their God-given gifts to the fullest for their own sake, but to use these to serve others and make the world a better place.

Paula Hamady (MS in Nursing) did her graduate school project so well that it might become a law. She created a comprehensive school program for teen mothers in West Virginia, including meals, transportation, certified teachers, counselors and extra time for learning. Paula turned a classroom assignment into to a model project, and now it is a bill that will be introduced in the West Virginia legislature this coming fall. The spirit, heart, and mind of Bellarmine University – and of Paula Hamady -- shine a light of hope into the region and beyond.

Bellarmino encourages excellence in everything our students do, not only academic excellence, but athletic excellence – and best yet, achieving excellence both in one's academic program and in athletics.

This year so many of our teams did so well – Women's Soccer, Women's Track & Field, Women's Softball – Men's Lacrosse under new Head Coach Kevin Burns, Men's Basketball – and graduating today are 2011 National Champions and 2012 Final Four team members Nick Holmes and Andrew Parks with their MBAs; Luke Sprague, Aaron Robison, and Braydon Hobbs – all student athletes. Thanks to all our student athletes for your excellent achievement and for representing Bellarmine so well.

One student athlete I particularly want to mention is Bryan Gennet (BA in Exercise Science). Bryan set a school record this year at the University of Kentucky Invitational

meet, jumping 16 ft. 11 ½ inches in the pole vault. We teach our students to reach for the stars – but apparently – also to jump over the moon! Nice going, Bryan!

Kayla Theisen (Pre-Physical Therapy) – our teams would never win were it not for your leadership of Knights Nation where you make every basketball game a romp and every away game – a home game. Thank you for showing us all what Bellarmine spirit means!

Bernadette Kovacs is an English major and a member of the Catholic Students Association. She served as the editor for Ariel Magazine and is a member of the honors program. She was also a finalist for the Trials program, which is hosted by Harvard University. Congratulations, Bernadette, for your outstanding address on Thursday at the Honors and Awards Dinner.

Among the many heroes in your class, no one more is impressive than our own Bryan Lamont Varner (BA communication). Bryan was born with cerebral palsy, weighing 1 lb., 14 ounces. His parents were told he'd never make it home from the hospital. But six months and 24 days later he did come home. Doctors then told Bryan's parents that he'd likely not survive to school age.

Now 25 years later, he is graduating from Bellarmine University with a degree in Communication. He fought through diabetes and dialysis, overcame medical leaves and surgery, and in the course of his college career, he befriended everyone he encountered, including me, made our campus more accessible and more alert to the challenges and assets of people with so-called disabilities, and has been a natural as a Bellarmine Radio DJ. In Bryan's own words, "I had a rough start, but I'm finishing strong!"

Many of you are entering the workforce in your various professions or in new careers, and the faculty and I are confident that you are well prepared.

Many of you, of course, also will be continuing your education at outstanding graduate schools across the country – beginning with Bellarmine and continuing at such places as the University of Cincinnati, the University of Chicago, Trinity College in Dublin, and several universities in England.

Bellarmino now enrolls over 3,300 undergraduate and graduate students, and over half of our 2,200 full-time undergraduates live on campus.

Our national and international reach now includes students from 40 states and 20 foreign countries.

Of the 40 states, today we graduate Mari Graham of Hanalei on the island of Kauai in the great state of Hawaii. At Bellarmine, Mari has done it all as a great student, an RA, a Mock Trial competitor, a member of the Diversity Taskforce, and as the manager of our Volleyball team. Her graduation today is of particular personal delight for Maureen and me because her father Max, distinguished lawyer in Hawaii (who still surfs every day) is a college classmate of mine. There are many Graham family members with us today all

the way from Hawaii, including her mother Karen. So to Mari and her family, mahalo nui loa and Aloha!

While I enjoy sharing with you some of the stories you represent, my regret is that time does not allow me to talk about each of you. I can see, however, just from these few stories, the Class of 2012 is an exceptional class, so I wanted to be sure to celebrate all of you by celebrating some of you. Congratulations! And thank you for being Bellarmine Knights!

Among the more fascinating areas of research in recent years is Molecular Biology and Biochemistry. Because I am an educator, helping people educate themselves and through them, helping to build a better world, I read everything I can get a hold of in these areas - especially as they relate to human behavior.

In the April 28-29 Wall Street Journal, there was an article called "The Trust Molecule," by Paul J. Zak. According to Zak and his colleagues, there is in human beings a molecule, a chemical messenger, called Oxytocin. For the past 11 years, Zak and his team have conducted a number of experiments showing that when someone's level of oxytocin goes up, he or she responds with greater care and greater generosity.

The article on this research goes on to say that to trigger this so called "moral molecule," all you have to do is give someone a sign of trust.

Quoting from the article, "When one person extends himself to another in a trusting way, by say, giving money – the person being trusted experiences a surge in oxytocin, which is another way of saying that the feeling of being trusted makes a person more trustworthy. Which over time, makes other people more inclined to trust, which in turn...If you detect the makings of an endless loop that can feed back onto itself, creating what might be called a virtuous circle – and ultimately a more virtuous society – you are getting the idea."

The author goes on to point out some inconsistencies in their theses and also to let us know that they know the world can be a rough and tumble place wherein an unwavering response of openness and loving kindness would be like going around with a "kick me" sign on your back.

So they point out that instead, this moral molecule works like a gyroscope "helping us maintain our balance between behavior based on trust and behavior based on wariness and distrust – navigating between the social benefits of openness – which are considerable – and the reasonable caution that we need to avoid being taken for a ride."

This is an enjoyable and interesting article, excerpted from a new book that was published two days ago by Dutton, a member of the Penguin group, and titled "The Moral Molecule."

I liked where they ended up in the article – "...Oxytocin orchestrates the kind of generous and caring behavior that every culture endorses as the right way to live – the

cooperative, benign, pro-social way of living that every culture on the planet describes as 'moral.'" Finally, it says "The Golden Rule is a lesson that the body already knows, and when we get it right, we feel the rewards immediately."

In my reflection upon reading this article, it occurred to me that perhaps on the molecular level and as a rule, the Bellarmine University community, faculty, staff, and students have, promote, and encourage in one another an exceptionally high level of oxytocin – and that may be one of the many reasons why we love this place so much, and why it is such a successful and effective place for teaching and learning – to become our truest, best selves (among other things) – because a Golden Rule community culture like Bellarmine is a moral culture.

It is a culture wherein we genuinely care for one another – as individuals and as whole persons – we respect the intrinsic dignity and infinite value of ourselves and one another, and generally speaking in such a climate, we tend to bring out the best in ourselves and in one another.

So my encouragement to you today certainly is to be alert, savvy, street-smart and as competitive in the rough and tumble world as you need to be, but also, as you go forward, in your personal life and in your work life, to be careful to nurture that essential balance within yourself – and ultimately to bring the best of your experience in the Bellarmine community with you into the world.

So to the extent that makes sense, trust yourself and trust others, and embrace the world with an open, caring, loving attitude and spirit.

Thank you for being trusting and open to the faculty, staff, to one another, and to me, and thank you for allowing the faculty, staff, and me to trust you, to love you, to care for you, and to help you bring out the very best in yourselves – a grand and profound achievement that in a moment we will celebrate by awarding you your Bellarmine University diploma.

Thanks and Godspeed.