

# December Commencement 2014

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 Bellarmine degrees! I welcome you into the distinguished company of the more than 22,000 alumnae and alumni throughout the world who constitute the Bellarmine University Alumni Association.

Congratulations, also, to my friend, former Trustee Tom Thomas, on your well-deserved honorary degree. Tom, on behalf of the entire Bellarmine community, I thank you for the leadership and insight you have provided throughout the years, but in particular as we shaped our new Institute for Advanced Analytics. Your professional experience and entrepreneurial spirit were invaluable to us in conceptualizing this exciting new venture. Countless future students, as well as our city and region, will be the beneficiaries.

Class of 2014, tonight we confer 159 combined undergraduate and graduate degrees. I know many of you have family and friends here to celebrate this important milestone with you. I want you to know that your Bellarmine family and I also are very proud of each and every one of you. Attaining a Bellarmine degree is no easy task. It takes great intelligence, energy, diligence, discipline and plain old hard work.

Bellarmino's trustees, faculty, staff and I are fully aware that every single one of you here this evening has his or her own inspiring and compelling success story. But if you will indulge me for a few moments, I'd like to share those of several of your fellow graduates:

**Ms. Morgan Kern**, an honors graduate in Environmental Science and Biology, has held an unusual summer job during her time at Bellarmine. She has championed endangered species protection as a Fish and Wildlife Technician at the Mammoth Cave freshwater mussel research facility operated by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. In addition to overseeing operations at the state mussel lab, she has mobilized volunteers to help place hatchery-raised mollusks back into their native river habitats. This fall, she collaborated with Dr. Martha Carlson Mazur to write and submit a research article describing her experimental work on mussels. Morgan plans to pursue her passion for rare bivalves as a graduate student next year.

**Ms. Zainab Wassef**, who completed her BA in Business Administration in the summer, is from Baghdad, Iraq. She attended Bellarmine through the Iraqi Student Project, a grassroots effort to help war-displaced Iraqi students attain an undergraduate education. Iraq's own educational system is in ruins. The Chronicle of Higher Education reported in 2007 that hundreds of professors and students in Iraq have been killed or kidnapped, hundreds more have fled, and those who remain face daily threats of violence. Students in Iraq are without teachers, books or computers. The Iraqi Student

Project helps Iraq's young people acquire the undergraduate education they will most surely need to participate in rebuilding their country.

**Mr. Faustin Ndagijimana** traveled a long road to arrive here tonight. A native of Rwanda in Central Africa, he had just started college at the National University of Rwanda when the genocide began in April 1994. That July, he fled the country for his safety, leaving his family behind. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, he lived in refugee camps for the next six months, almost dying of dysentery before a Catholic aid organization arrived with life-saving medicine. With the help of a Franciscan nun who paid for his plane ticket, he eventually made it to Senegal, West Africa, and then, in 1997, to Louisville as a refugee sponsored by Catholic Charities. He spoke no English and had nothing but a backpack, but he was determined to work hard, rebuild his life and become financially independent. He saw education as the key. He entered Jefferson Technical Community College almost as soon as he arrived in Louisville to learn English. He took evening classes and worked during the day to support himself and the family he left in Rwanda. In May 2002 Faustin received an MBA from the University of Louisville, and tonight he receives his Master's in Taxation from Bellarmine. What a remarkable story!

Finally, I'd like to say a few words about **Mr. Will Ford**. As one of his professors put it, "Where there's a Will Ford, there's a way." In his seven semesters at Bellarmine, this communication and political science graduate has definitely left his mark on the campus community – and we look forward to seeing what he will do next. Will created and organized the popular "Oversized Influence" music festival that was held at Bellarmine during Labor Day weekend, featuring all kinds of music written and performed by Bellarmine students and alumni. Working with music faculty members Todd Hildreth and Ben Aguilar, he developed the event, ran social media and event promotions, coordinated with the artists and did all the behind-the-scenes grunt work. As a show host and music director for Bellarmine Radio and as a reporter and editor-in-chief for The Concord, Will helped our campus media grow, while always keeping the focus on the Bellarmine community. He says that in his time at Bellarmine, he encouraged everyone to get involved and make an impact. "It doesn't have to be a big impact," he said, "and you don't have to have the loudest voice. But at least have your voice out there."

While wildly different in the details, what these four stories have in common is their protagonists' desire to make a difference in the world – to make their voices heard. And that, I believe, is one of the values that sets the Bellarmine graduate apart.

In your time here, you have learned the skills and the knowledge that will help you to be successful in whatever career path you choose – but you have also come to realize that you are a part of something bigger and that you can have a positive and lasting impact on those around you.

I am confident that each and every one of you, as you go forth from this very special place, will continue to create meaningful lives for yourselves and also to make positive contributions to your fellow human being in our city, our region, and our world. Please join me, therefore, and give yourselves a round of applause – as proud members of the Bellarmine University Class of 2014!

Earlier this month, I had the honor of speaking at the inaugural Bellarmine Illuminaria event at Our Lady of the Woods Chapel. This new event was conceptualized and designed by students as a way of celebrating this Season, the Season of Love and Light.

Tonight, I am again thinking of the powerful symbolism of Light. It is certainly a powerful religious reference. It is there in the opening words of the Bible: “Let there be Light.” Throughout the Old and New Testaments, Light is regularly associated with God, with salvation and with truth.

Here at Bellarmine, we also use the symbolism of Light. Illumination is one of our university values – illumination in the sense of the pursuit of enlightenment, of understanding, and of Truth, *In Veritatis Amore*.

The blazing torch in the lower right quadrant of the shield in Bellarmine’s coat of arms symbolizes the light of truth and love, shining through, above, and beyond the darkness of ignorance and hatred.

Bellarmino University serves as a beacon of light for this community – and you, as graduates and ambassadors of this university, hold a spark of that light within you. As our inspiration, Thomas Merton, whose 100th birthday we celebrate this year, wrote about the epiphany he had in downtown Louisville in 1958, you are all “shining like the sun.”

We are a community of light, Class of 2014, and as you go from this place, you will carry that light – and hope, and joy – with you. Godspeed to each of you as, with your service, your wisdom and your faith, you light up all the dark corners of the world.

Congratulations to you, the newest alumnae and alumni of Bellarmine University, and Happy Holidays!

Dr. Joseph J. McGowan  
President