

Address to the Trinity College Graduating Class of 2023  
By Nicole Hockley '92

President Berger-Sweeney, members of the Board of Trustees, members of the faculty, parents, esteemed guests, and fabulous members of the Class of 2023. It's an honor and a privilege to be celebrating this proud moment with you! Your hard work, commitment, and perseverance has paid off, and you are ready to take the next big step forward in your life. Congratulations!

I am deeply honored to be your Commencement speaker. I admit when I was asked I was quite nervous! I've given hundreds of speeches over the last 10 years, but nothing like this. So, I've spent a lot of time preparing for today. Over the next 60 minutes, I'll be sharing a lot of unsolicited advice, clichéd platitudes, and anecdotes that you will never remember. For those of you who are paying attention, just kidding.

I'm often asked to give 60-minute speeches, and my response is always the same: no one wants to listen to anyone for 60 minutes. But if you will allow me to share this space with you for the next 10 minutes, I promise to do my best to give you something to remember.

Today is graduation day. It's a huge accomplishment. Some of you may already have plans in place for what comes next. Some of you may still be contemplating different ideas and options. Both are OK.

Your life will have many twists and turns ahead, and all of them should be leaned into with curiosity and a willingness to embrace possibilities, to learn from every experience, and continue moving forward . . . just like you did here at Trinity College.

When I graduated from Trinity in 1992, well before you were born, I was brimming with excitement, yet had no idea what to do next. I only knew that I wanted to move to England, where I was sure I would be overwhelmed with exciting job offers.

That September after graduation, I moved to England. And I became a dishwasher. And then a cafeteria worker in a tax office. I managed a mail room at a law firm and then became a purchasing clerk at a food manufacturer. None of these were what I studied for at Trinity. None of these were what I wanted to do.

But I didn't let that bring me down. Instead, I committed to doing each of those jobs to the very best of my ability while constantly applying for positions that I wanted. In each of those temporary roles, I was given more responsibility, and even job offers, until I was finally offered a role I wanted—an entry-level position in the food manufacturer's marketing department.

Being the best I could be, even in places I didn't want to be, paid off, and my career began.

That's the first theme I hope you remember: *Whatever you do, wherever you find yourself, take pride and commit to doing your best work and being the best possible YOU.*

If you put your best out into the world, the world will respond. You may not get your first-choice job or graduate school. You may not get your second or third choice. But whatever you get and wherever you find yourself, be your best. Because someone *chose you* to be there. And that makes you special. So be special in return.

Life won't always go as you planned or hoped. Things will happen that you can't control. Yes, there will be triumphs, but you will also experience heartbreak, loss, trauma, and grief.

I lived in England for 18 years after graduation, steadily growing my career and family, though the goal had always been to return to the U.S. In early 2011, I returned, settling in Newtown, Connecticut.

Less than two years later, both of my sons were at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012. My eldest, Jake, survived in his third-grade class. He is my living heart and my greatest joy. My youngest, Dylan, was killed in his first-grade classroom, alongside 19 of his fellow students and six educators.

My life changed in ways I hope none of you ever experience.

What happened, the murder of my youngest son, was not something I could control. What happened after? That was my choice. Instead of succumbing to my grief, I chose to channel my sadness, anger, and love into preventing others from sharing my experience. My life's mission became about creating a safer, better future for young people. For your generation—and the generations to come.

It was an easy choice to make, but an incredibly hard choice to execute.

Partisan politics . . . false assumptions about me and my work . . . making the transition from a successful corporate life to starting and leading a national nonprofit organization . . . none of this has been easy. And, thankfully, I didn't do it alone.

Whether your life transitions from one positive experience to the next or has seemingly endless unsurmountable challenges at every turn, you will find a way through—but please remember, you do not have to take it all on yourself.

Find those with a similar purpose. Those who share your passion. Those who inspire you, who make you laugh out loud, who help you push past your fear, and challenge you to think, to dream, and to be brave and bold. Make these people your friends, your colleagues, your chosen family. When things go wrong—which they will—lean into them to lift you up, and always be there for them.

That's the second theme I hope you remember: *Lean on others. Look for the helpers—and, just as importantly, BE a helper.*

I've mentioned hard times and challenges. To pretend that life after today will be filled with sunshine and rainbows would be wrong. No life journey is easy. And it's not supposed to be, or we would never learn and grow.

In my 52 years, I have accomplished a lot. I am proud of the mom I am, the friend I am, and the organizational leader I am. I literally see lives being saved every day because of the work my team and I do.

But for every accomplishment, there is at least one poor choice made, at least one failure or mistake. There are days I'm still overwhelmed with the work I need to do—professionally and personally. There are days when my to-do lists have lists, and, for every task I complete, another 10 tasks get added.

I used to say my life's quote was "Do or do not. There is no try." Yes, I am quoting Yoda. He's a wise being, but now I think he got this one wrong. There is a lot of "try." Life is nonstop trying—because we don't know the outcome or impact of a decision until we've made it. So decide! Then keep trying. Stay focused on your mission, your purpose, and the change you want to see in the world.

And when you fail—as you will—don't dwell in that negative space. Trust in yourself and the people you have gathered close to you. Trust that failure is there to help you learn, to find a way forward, and lead you to success.

Which brings me to the third theme I hope you remember: *Use your voice.*

As you leave Trinity College and you want to try new things or change something for the better, you will likely encounter people who are afraid of change. Those who dismiss you and say: "You're too young," "You don't know what you want," and "That's not how we do things here." Saying your opinion, your beliefs, and your voice don't matter.

Your voice *always* matters.

You may be young, but that doesn't define your ability to be successful and create something better. You have personal agency. You have power. You don't need to be granted that power from an employer or a professor, a politician, or a parent—it is intrinsically yours.

And you get to choose *how* you use your voice. Whether that's advocating for yourself or advocating for systemic change, your voice, your engagement, your action, has power.

Others may disagree with you or just want to keep to the status quo. I experience that constantly in my work. It can be exhausting to advocate against the status quo. To advocate for change. But if the status quo isn't working for everyone—for you, for those around you, for those who may not have your privilege, for those who live on the margins—then the status quo needs to change.

Using your voice will bring consequences, but those consequences could be what paves the way for others to use their voices. This is how the greatest advances in society are made.

And as you use your voice, please do that from a place of kindness.

If there is only one thing you remember from what I've said, I hope it is to *be kind*. To yourself and to everyone you encounter. You can challenge the status quo, you can be a helper and uplift others, you can try and fail and try again, you can cause trouble, you can be the best version of you—but to be kind while doing so is truly the most important thing.

There is so much anger in the world right now. So much fighting for the sake of fighting, or for money or for power. Don't fall into that trap. Be kind, compassionate, and empathetic. Being kind is not a weakness. It is a character trait, a strength at the core of our humanity. It takes effort to be an ass. It takes heart to be kind. Be the generation that leads through kindness.

Kindness doesn't have to be big and grandiose. Small acts of kindness can have huge impact.

My son Dylan was autistic. And like many people on the spectrum, he had a repetitive action. He was a flapper. Whenever he was happy or excited, which seemed to be all the time, he would jump up and down and flap his arms. One day, I asked him, "Dylan, why do you flap?" I wasn't really expecting him to answer. But he did. He said, "Because I am a beautiful butterfly." And for me, he was.

At his funeral, I shared that story, and talked about the butterfly effect. The idea that a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world creates tiny changes in the atmosphere, setting molecules of air into motion that eventually create (or prevent) a tornado in another part of the world. The butterfly does not create or power the tornado. The flapping wings just start the chain of events. Had the butterfly not flapped its wings, the change might not have happened or might have been vastly different.

What does this mean for us? It means that everything we do matters.

We don't need to take big, earth-changing actions. Every smile, every act of kindness, every time you use your voice for change—these all have meaning and create action and ripple effects that you may not even realize. We were created to make a difference. *You* were created to make a difference.

Through my work with Sandy Hook Promise, I get to spend a lot of time in schools, particularly meeting middle schoolers and high schoolers. And when I look out at them during presentations, I don't see a group of students. All I see are butterflies. And when I look at all of you, I still see butterflies.

And if just one butterfly can cause a tornado, imagine what you can do. Imagine what we can all do, collectively. We can cause more than a tornado. We can create a better future.

After today, you're no longer a student of Trinity College. You are an alum, just like me. Let's show the next generation of Trinity students the way to be butterflies, too.

Go boldly forward into your future. Be the best at whatever you're asked to do. Never stop trying. Embrace all the beauty and the hard parts of life. Use your voice to change the narrative. And always, *always*, remember to be kind and bring your grace and love to everything you do.

Make your life your mission. And make that mission your passion.