

# Commencement

2007 George Wharton Pepper Prize Speech  
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I would like to start by thanking all the families, friends, and faculty who supported the members of the class of 2007 as they opened their minds to new ideas and struggled to identify their unique talents, passions, values, and interests. I would also like to say thank you to my own parents, my brother, my family and friends for dealing with me. I love you guys.

Debbie Bial, the founder of Posse, talked about the organization at her Commencement speech last year. Posse is a leadership, scholarship foundation for inner city kids, and if you know anything about Posse, you know how it got started. A bunch of smart and talented inner-city kids are going off to these small, homogeneous liberal arts colleges, but ended up dropping out after only a semester or two. Debbie Bial asked these kids what the problem was and one of them responded, "I would have never dropped out if I'd had my posse with me."

And I'm here to tell you today that this is true. I would have never made it without Posse. I'm very grateful to Lafayette for forming a partnership with an organization that provides talented, urban high school students an opportunity to attend a college of such high caliber. Now, I am very glad to have attended Lafayette, but when I first got on campus, I hated it. It was like something straight out of an American Eagle ad. It was really hard to be somewhere where everyone was part of a majority to which you didn't belong.

In the high school, I was one of the few white kids. But aside from a few white-kid comments, I rarely noticed that I was part of a minor-

ity. It could have been attributed to the fact that it was New York City, but it never seemed to matter until I got to campus. Here, surprisingly, I was considered part of a minority group, although I looked like the majority of campus.

It was not just a divide I felt, but also the apathy among many students here. It was a huge culture shock, and it took a lot of growth and understanding to move from intense anger and frustration to productivity and inspiration. During my time here I was able to build relationships with some of the youth in Easton, and many of them are here today — make noise if you're here! Some use words like disadvantaged, inner-city kids, project kids. I use words like inspirational, creative, hard lives. I want them to know that college is possible. I urge my kids to follow in our footsteps, and someday be sitting where we are. But I also urge every member of the Lafayette community to remain active and positive role models and inspiration for the youth of today.

The things I value the most about my Lafayette experience were the opportunities and resources a school like this provides. I have studied abroad more times than my passport would allow, in places like Namibia, South Africa, and Guatemala. I have been able to build houses in South Carolina, work with the youth of Chicago, and, above all, Lafayette's faculty and administrators supported and challenged me. And as a result next year I will be teaching in Indonesia on the Fulbright Scholarship and the following year in a troubled New York City high school, through Teach For America. I was able to self-design my own major, titled creative media and social jus-



tice, and was even able to co-found a creative arts organization, W.O.R.D.S. – Writing Organization Reaching Dynamic Students.

Looking back on my four years, I have written countless poems. This following poem strings together the problems of the world, then moves on to the beauty experienced as a child and trying to hold on to that beauty.

Like Coldplay, it was all yellow from the suicide bombs igniting the sky sending shrapnel rain that ashes the limbs of Lebanese children kicking a bowl inside bomb shelters. Inhaling dust of casualties that look like them, sing songs of freedom, choose new curtained and gassed-in chambers, denied women's rights, the raped self-medicate with clothes hangers, tasting HIV tears as they stream down newborn's faces, hate and crying on brick walls to remind those that are on trial for same kisses.

The dichotomy of these races is the hypocrisy of this nation. I have black friends, I have white friends, Latinos, and Asians. I have just human friends of different origins and sexual orientations, different denominations. I'm just not friends with discrimination.

9/11 shattered my spectrum. Freedom never cost so many lives. Why, keeps popping into my mind. I rewind to the days before I knew their names. Never the victims, always the shooter embroidered on that history page from Dylan to Eric, even Timothy McVeigh. We turn from tragedy to blame, but I refuse to let this be it.

And it's easy to reminisce on the days of the Fresh Prince. Remember in the days when blue was a flavor and laughing until it hurt my side, days of kickball, handball, and Slip-N-Slide. When an eternity was playing Monopoly and War. Before the war, before Manhunt 1-2-3, 1-2-3 was against the Iraqis. Then Yo-Yo's then Tamagotchis, summer days of double-dutch and football with two-hand touch. Super Mario Bros. and hugs

from my mother, playing Ninja Turtles and pretending to be Rafael. I remember watching the Smurfs and wondering why Smurfette was the only female. Captain Planet saying, "The power is yours!" When you actually had to get up to channel switch. When you got a kiss for a cut.

But I know that this beauty still exists and I, with my small hands, can never find the space to hold you correctly, so I backspace over words and never quite capture your beauty. A beauty that floods universal description, as I have danced with Chiapas to cumbia beats, been inspired by Afrocentric poets Brooklyn Bread. I have moved to songs of slave hymns, felt the strength and stories of Zimbabwean refugees, and bathed in European waters, washed the guilt from my pores, the way tears ricocheted between my eyelashes to blur vision: a beauty to make Webster redefine his definition.

Searching for quality, but now we stingily strive independently to achieve what can only be accomplished collectively. I'm imprisoned by my visions for an equal life. I can't beg you to do the same, but if you did, we can figure out how to break free from our chains.

We often think of success through monetary value and celebrity status. Rarely do we think of success in terms of happiness, following passions, and making a positive difference. We also tend to define diversity in terms of colors, different races on the cover of a brochure or a web site. As the future leaders of this nation, we must not fall victim to these false definitions or we will promote stratification, ruthlessness, and conformity. This degree opens up doors and opportunities. Make wise choices, and like Debbie Bial said, "Dream big for yourself, yes, but dream big for our society as well."

Thank you and congratulations.

