

Marietta College
Commencement Address
Delivered by Laura Baudo Sillerman, May 19, 2007

Members of the Class of 2007, what a privilege it is to speak to you today ... and I want to assure you that while I feel honored to be here...I know how you are feeling.

What people say about life where I come from is that in New York City the opposite of talking is not listening...it's waiting.

It's easy to imagine you are all sitting there waiting...waiting for this talk to be over, waiting to get your diplomas, waiting to get on with celebrating and then with the rest of your lives.

And that seems as good a thing to talk about as anything...waiting.

It is well known that a sign of maturity and indeed of a moral life is the ability to defer gratification...to wait for pleasure until after you've dispatched your responsibilities. To eat your spinach before you have dessert. Indeed a great deal of success in college, depends upon such waiting.

But as a representative of, shall we say a slightly older generation, I am here to tell you that life is about knowing when to wait and when to...leap.

And after you've done your time waiting, being patient and responsible, leaping is **necessary** and greatly aided by knowing a simple truth:

Anything Is Possible

It is possible that an awkward poor boy with a congenital disease and a lifelong battle with depression would become the finest president this nation has ever had.

It is possible that a young man who lost an arm would remain the drummer in a world-class rock band. And that an Irish rock musician would change the future of the entire continent of Africa.

Someone who is dyslexic would write some of America's favorite novels.

A blind woman born deaf and living as a mute would eventually tour the world giving inspirational speeches.

A freshman who only left Sophia Russell Hall to go to classes would one day be giving Marietta's commencement speech.

Abraham Lincoln. Def Leppard's Rick Allen. Bono. John Irving. Helen Keller... me. All real people who really have done these things.

Because **anything is possible**.

Here are some things that have happened at Marietta College:

In 1968 there was a mock Presidential election on this campus which brought out enough students to pass a new student body

constitution. At that moment Marietta changed from a place where girls had to wear skirts to class and boys had to wear jackets and ties to dinner to a place where students were part of the real world.

A generation of leaders went out from the mid-Ohio Valley to head not-for-profit institutions, establish government policy, even take a role in world peace.

Some are living as doctors without borders and one was a civilian working for democracy in Iraq. When they graduated they were who you are now. They took it upon themselves to make a difference in the worlds and the wider world each and every day.

Because they believed anything was possible.

Steve Schwartz who taught here for 32 years was a Milton scholar who quoted poetry and practiced Mozart on his piano. One day some students came to him and said, “we need a place to hang out.” And Steve—a nice Jewish boy from Long Island with a dissertation about losing paradise—took his tool box and worked with those kids to build The Gathering Place.

And who knows if it was cause and effect, but when some trustees and alums saw the energy that went into that space, they took a look around and gave some money and one day we went from little Ban Johnson to a 21st Century Rec Center.

Very few people through there would ever be the vision to build a building like this on this campus...just as very few believed we'd have women visionaries at the helm.... but clearly **it was possible**.

It's possible that someone who seemed stuck in almost menial jobs would get up the gumption to risk everything on an Ivy League Masters Degree and become the official deciding the face of one of America's most vibrant cities.

It's possible that a couple who met at Marietta, each coming from very simple backgrounds, would marry, gain wealth and use their influence to fight prejudice, battle, poverty, further feminism and be absolutely certain world leaders are working with the facts.

That a young man would be expelled from Marietta for speaking about dishonesty in the administration and would be reinstated and graduate a decade and a half later, after becoming an attorney and carrying the fight for justice into much larger arenas.

That a boy whose father went bankrupt and whose life cratered at that moment would find the strength to make his own fortune and help redefine philanthropy in America.

It's possible that people who were outsiders would decide to bloom where they found themselves.

How can I say this? Because I know the people who lived each of these stories and every one of them is here today.

Yes, it's possible to graduate from Marietta and go out and make the world better. It's more than possible...it's necessary.

A Marietta graduate helped discover the cause and course of the HIV virus. A Marietta graduate worked to change education in the south. Another is helping immigrant workers in a town where they are unwanted. Another insures a respite from cancer for kids at a camp in Georgia. Major league ballplayers and managers. An astronaut. I needn't go on. You get the picture.

You are joining the long blue line today...and it absolutely winds its way through the world's joys, but it also takes in the sights and certainties of the worlds sorrows...**and it does something about them.**

And what about you?

Some one of you wants to leave Ohio and live in a foreign country. Another wants to further her education and help the needy. Who is the one who wishes to change completely, going from shy and self-effacing to influential and effective?

The stand up comedian?

A volunteer in India?

What you've never told anyone about?

It's all absolutely positively possible.

It's possible to stop global warming and it's your generation that's going push the rest of us to do it.

It's possible to stop hate. And to respect each other.

It starts by knowing the past is not necessarily prologue. You are young and strong and anything that has happened to you—**anything at all**—does not have to be the ink in which the blueprint is drawn. In fact, there is no blueprint when you graduate today. There are the tools to make your own life design. Because you've been taught by good people who gave you what you need to make the decisions you need to make.

So go ahead and decide.

Decide to change. Decide to do something big or be satisfied with something simple. Please, please decide to be kind...to others and to yourself. And then decide one thing more.

Decide to leap right into the big picture.

There can be world peace.

There can be an end to crushing hunger.

There can be a cure for cancer.

There can be a sustainable green world.

...if we stop thinking only about ourselves and getting more and having more.

This sad old earth is the only life raft we know about in the vast and scary sea of the universe. You are the ones who are going to have to paddle soon.

So... **exercise and vote.**

I wish you the strength you need.

I wish you joy on your way to wherever you are going and the courage to change directions if you need to.

May you love well and sacrifice for others.

May you remember everything that can help you.

May you forget what you cannot forgive.

May you know when to wait and when to leap.

And may all of you leap...knowing that absolutely anything and everything is possible.

Even for you.

Even in here in this room today.

And certainly for the future of those you know and those you don't.

The best of luck to each and every one of you.

Thank you.