

Commencement Speaker 2022

Janice Nevin '77 P'13

June 4, 2022

When You Lead with Love, Excellence will Follow

Wow... this is a surreal feeling—standing at this podium in what may be the most revered place on campus. If the walls of the Garth could talk!

As St. Andreans, we all have our stories about time spent in this beautiful space. Nine years ago, I sat where your parents are sitting as my own daughter, Annie '13, graduated. And 45 years ago, I sat right where you are at my own Commencement ceremony. Fun side note, we'll all now be coming back for big Reunions on the same years. I'll see you at my 50th and your 5th Reunion!

It's a privilege to be with you for this pivotal day in your lives. Thank you for inviting me to speak. Thank you, Joy, for that kind introduction. And thank you for your leadership—what a year!

It is a privilege but also daunting to speak to this incredibly accomplished audience of students, teachers, and learners. The schoolgirl in me fully expects to get a powerful critique from Mrs. Mein or Mr. Van Buchem at the conclusion of this talk.

I've been thinking a lot about expectations as I prepared for today. It is easy to forget the large role expectations play in our lives, but graduation is a moment when we feel their weight—the expectations we place on ourselves, the expectations others place on us and the expectations we have for the world around us and our future. As a leader I often say my job is to help people exceed their own expectations. It is a wonderful feeling when we do even better than we thought possible. And yet, so often things don't go as expected.

No doubt you had expectations of your time at St. Andrew's when you first arrived on campus. I can say with absolute confidence that COVID-19 affected your experience in ways you never expected. And I can say with that same confidence that given the option you would not have chosen to spend your last three years here dealing with a pandemic—wondering if you would ever be back on campus, if you would ever be in class without a mask, if you would ever make another Frosty Run, if your parents would ever see you play sports or perform on stage.

But the fact of the matter is, you didn't get to choose.

Commencement speeches are often filled with advice meant to inspire, creating expectations: follow your passion, everything is possible, choose your own adventure. US Women's soccer star, activist, and a source of personal inspiration to me, Abby Wambach just gave a commencement speech and talked about flipping over tables... Her expectation of the Class of 2022 at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles: when you get a hard-fought-for seat at the table, don't just sit there thankful to be at the table, flip the table over! And because I

am at St. Andrew's, although it may be considered trite to bring up Dead Poets Society, indulge me for a moment. In the most famous line from that movie, Robin Williams tells those boys, "Carpe diem! Seize the day!"

What he doesn't say is you can't always choose the day you need to seize. And, what Abby doesn't say is the table may be bolted to the ground. In other words, there are times when the adventure chooses you.

I was part of the first group of girls to attend St. Andrew's. There were just 26 of us. I have often joked that this prepared me for the rest of my career. Though a lot of progress has been made, women leaders in healthcare remain few and far between. But as I reflect on the past 45 years through the lens of the last two and a half—the COVID-19 pandemic—I have come to realize my understanding of leadership, and in particular the importance of values, people and culture, comes from St. Andrew's. My time here really did prepare me for my career.

As a first girl, we were required to play sports with very limited choices. We were required to play field hockey and basketball—I didn't even know what a lay-up was when I started. Not surprisingly, I was the first girl to receive the award for most improved in basketball. And I rowed. Crew helped define my experience here and was something I continued into college as a member of the Radcliffe Lightweights... and beyond.

So, it seems only appropriate to turn to a rowing metaphor when thinking about times when the adventure chooses you. How do you create the synchrony that moves you forward? What keeps you from catching a crab and unsettling the entire boat? How do you come from behind and win the race? How do you rally when the adventure chooses you—when you're faced with the unexpected?

First—there are your values, the beliefs you hold at your core about how you should go through the world. Second—at the risk of extending my metaphor a little too far, there are the other people in the boat with you. Values and people create culture.

When I first heard reports of a new virus in China in December 2019, I remember thinking that our ability to conquer the pandemic was going to be the ultimate test of leadership. As the virus inevitably approached our region, I reflected on my role as a leader. What would be expected of me? What decisions would I have to make? Nowhere in my job description does it say, "lead through a pandemic." We were heading into a time of unprecedented uncertainty—needing to write the playbook for addressing that uncertainty while we were caring for our people and our community.

Fortunately, and I do mean fortunately, several years ago, our entire organization engaged in work to establish our values and the behaviors that would support them. As part of that work, I spent time learning from [former Head of School] Tad Roach, because I know the power of the St. Andrew's culture, built and sustained on enduring values. I needed to understand how to do that at ChristianaCare. What emerged was ChristianaCare's values statement: "We serve together with excellence and love."

"Serving together" is the importance of team—and knowing that you never have to serve alone. "Excellence" is being exceptional today and even better tomorrow. And "love" - love is not often talked about in healthcare. Love is, of course, compassion and caring. But it is also showing respect, embracing diversity, assuming good

intentions, seeking to understand and, notably, it is speaking the truth with courage and empathy. Love means you do hard things. What I have learned is that when you lead with love, excellence is inevitable.

As the communities we serve faced down infection wave after infection wave over the past two years, we lived our values as never before. We led with love and discovered we could do things we had never imagined possible. In less than 24 hours we stood up the first mass testing site in the region demonstrating that we had community spread and that a community-wide response was necessary. We reconfigured our hospitals repeatedly, at times in less than a day, to accommodate the multiple surges in volume. Practically overnight, we accelerated our three-year digital technology strategy and started providing what has now resulted in hundreds of thousands of virtual visits and millions of secure texts—an entirely new way of providing care. When the time came, we rapidly set up vaccination sites. And, as you may have seen, yes, we got to vaccinate President and Dr. Biden!

As a leader, the safety and wellbeing of our people have been and remain my priority. I have spent countless hours over the last two years, wearing my white coat, walking the halls, speaking directly with our caregivers. I needed to hear their anxieties, understand their needs, and learn their experience. This was especially true during the latest surge which resulted in historic volumes and required an unprecedented we serve together response. I was able to translate what I heard into actions like offering disposable scrubs, prepaid childcare, adding resources to our Center for Worklife Wellbeing, all the while enhancing transparency and providing relentless communication. But, most importantly, seeing their extraordinary commitment to caring for each other and for our patients filled my heart and soul. It inspired me. Their resolve, commitment to caring under extraordinary circumstances, their ingenuity was like medicine for me. Over and over, I heard them say, “This is healthcare. It’s what we do—this is what it means to serve together with love and excellence.”

Early in the pandemic, we knew that COVID 19 would shine a bright light on the health disparities experienced by our most vulnerable communities. So, we partnered deeply with community organizations, schools, faith-based organizations and with state and local government and took that caring to those communities—setting up testing sites, providing vaccinations, connecting people to care. And in the wake of the social unrest following George Floyd’s murder, we made a public commitment to being an anti-racism organization. I know that we will not impact health unless we address health equity and racial justice. As an organization we are holding ourselves accountable to making meaningful and measurable change so that all people can experience health. When you lead with love, equity is achievable.

It has been a challenging couple of years and the pandemic has taken a physical, mental and emotional toll on our caregivers. Our people are healthcare heroes, but even more so healthcare humans. And, as humans, I needed to be clear: it is okay to not be okay, and we need to provide the resources they needed to heal.

I’m sure you have felt your own level of stress and strain from the pandemic. I hope you have found ways to cope and reached out for help when you’ve needed it. It is not a sign of weakness, but instead of great strength, to acknowledge, “I am hurting.” And there is great power in it, too—the power to then be able to do something about it. Pandemic or not, I think it’s important at this moment of such significant transition in your lives—as you prepare to take on the adventures life has in store for you, adventures that may not be of your own choosing—to remember that, like we told our caregivers... it’s okay to not be okay.

As our values and people—our culture—are helping ChristianaCare through the pandemic, it is clear it that your values, the people sitting all around you and the St. Andrew's culture got you through this adventure you did not expect and here, today, to your Commencement.

This fall my husband and I got a text from an alum and parent whose daughters were here at the same time as Annie. It was an invitation to see the St. Andrew's soccer team, the last seed in the state tournament, take on Wilmington Friends School, a much higher seed and the team expected to win. It had been a very long time since we had attended a high school sporting event but—with the promise of lunch to follow—off we went. We sat and cheered with former and current parents, faculty members and alums. It was a great game! St. Andrew's exceeded expectations and advanced to the semifinals.

In our conversations ahead of this Commencement address, Joy brought up the soccer team's success as an example of the school's enduring culture. She said the senior leaders on the team created a guiding principle number one: "We love each other, no matter what." (Sounds like serving together with love and excellence). The team lived their values, relied on each other, loved each other, and as a result went much further in the tournament than expected. After all, when you lead with love excellence is inevitable.

Joy shared many examples of how the Class of 2022 exceeded expectations. Together, you took on a moment not of your own choosing. And you not only survived, you thrived. You didn't need to be told what to do, how to lead. You lived your values. You owned your culture. Your leadership, through an adventure not of your own choosing, has defined the experience of the Third, Fourth and Fifth Formers who are here today and will leave an indelible imprint on generations of students to come. I am sure the St. Andrew's history books will talk of this as a time of change as great as the years following World War II or the transition to co-education, of which I was a part. Future classes will look back and say, "Wow, look at what they did."

The pandemic has changed each of us. But what has not changed for me is how my time at St. Andrew's shows up in my life. And I hope the same for you.

I loved rowing and often describe it as the ultimate team sport, relying deeply on each individual but only achieving success, exceeding expectations, when the team moves in exquisite precision, the boat gliding on top of the water with meaning and purpose. Values and people.

As confident as I am that your time here was not what you expected, I am even more confident that you are well prepared to tackle whatever this unpredictable, crazy, tragic, beautiful world has in store for you.

St. Andrew's has equipped you with the values and the people you need to face whatever adventure chooses you.

You can seize the day—any day—but I expect you already know that.

Congratulations class of 2022—see you in five!

Janice Nevin '77 P'13, CEO of ChristianaCare Hospital in Newark, Delaware