

## Honors Commencement Keynote Address

Thank you Dr. Goodstein.

Two years ago, I was at a festival in Stafford Springs where I had the chance to hear a band called “Everyday Heroes.” Everyday heroes – its quite the name for a band, but the more you think, the more you realize that everyday heroes is more than a band name.

Everyday heroes: I’m going to talk about some everyday heroes this afternoon. We’re going to go from World War II to Britney Spears, so sit tight. But first, a few thank yous.

Thank you to Dr. Austin for your presence here today. Thank you to my parents for your support. Thank you to my friends for your encouragement and humor. Thank you to my thesis advisors for making the honors experience possible. And thank you to Dr. Goodstein for giving me the chance to speak here today.

For some reason, someone thought that I could impart some sense of wisdom on you today. Someone thought I would be a good person to reflect on the past and use it to give you advice for the future. However, I doubt there is little information that I could tell you from my short life experience that you do not know already – and I am sure you are all equally qualified to take my place here today. Therefore, I am going to talk about something important, perhaps you will think it is clichéd – but I am going to talk about people. Yes, that is right. Average everyday people.

Some people try to be all things to all people, it’s a nice trick if you can pull it off, but to make a difference you have to take a stand. There is a song on the radio that says something

like, “you’ll be a pop star, all you have to change is everything you are.” Yes, it is true – people tell me to change who I am every day of my life; I am sure that you get the same suggestions as I do. And while the advice is well intentioned, I always give it serious thought, and am always hoping to learn and grow, I’m not going to change who I am.

In case you don’t know me, with me, what you see is what you get: I’m a nerdy guy with university scholar medal, who spent the last four semesters analyzing budgetary data; who gets excited by CSPAN and whose big television dilemma is whether to watch the History Channel or CNN. And that’s the bad news. The good news is I am committed to what I believe in, I am not afraid to rock the boat, I give credit where credit is due, but more importantly I have a sense of the people who around me and before me – and I let them inspire me.

Everyday heroes – my heroes, they give me strength and their struggles seem so enormous compared to anything we think we will face as we leave this university. But just because we think our future may be easier does not mean we are called to complacency.

Everyday heroes. Perhaps when I say the word hero, you think of great names. You think of names like Martin Luther King, Lance Armstrong, or Thomas Jefferson. Certainly, these historic figures merit the title of hero. History – by its very nature – notices great names, but beyond the important names are the names of everyday average people.

These everyday people are people whose names are not recorded in history. If anything, the history that is taught through textbooks is missing a lot because it ignores the history of the individual – the story of a life. By no means do I wish to convey a sense of inferiority to the courage of people like Martin Luther King, who sacrificed his life for an ideology he believed

in. Rather, I wish to point out that there are everyday people who are just as courageous as the martyred leader – and although these “average” people do not bend history on the national stage, these everyday individuals send forth a tiny ripple of hope.

If you were asked to identify your hero, who would you say – often the word hero is monumental and we ignore those people around us. So let me tell you a few stories.

The other day, I was reading a book detailing the history of U.S. military action during World War II. The book was filled with names of Eisenhower, Patton, and MacArthur – all great generals. What was missing was the story of the everyday warriors – the true everyday heroes.

Perhaps it is idealistic of me to give credit to the average private soldier, but what would be the history of war be without the history of the warriors? All everyday heroes are warriors – they are people who do battle for a noble cause, but whose names are forgotten by history. About two years ago, several UConn students were activated to engage in military operations in Iraq. They were given little notice, but rather, simply told to pack their bags and head off to training. These students – people like Idania Peralta – were 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22 years old. In the scheme of things they were still kids, yet they were expected, with little training, to stand before firing insurgents and rebel armies. They were expected to give their life up to a bullet before they could legally have a beer. Idania Peralta returned back home this year. She – along with the kids who returned with her – and those who did not, were everyday heroes.

Then there is Frank Macri – a New York City Police Officer who was called to the towers on September 11, 2001 – a day that seems so far away, but that was only in the first few weeks of our first semester on campus. Frank Macri was an everyday hero – he saved people’s

lives. And as the buildings began to fall, he was continuing to try and save lives, barely getting out in time himself. For his actions, he has received little recognition and little press – but that is how he wants it. I am sure he would even say that he should not be included on this list of everyday heroes simply because he was trying to do his job of helping others and that the courage he showed was no different than what any other person would have done.

How about some less dramatic examples – academic heroes – think of your advisors and what their assistance meant to you over the past several semesters. There is little financial incentive for a faculty member to sign on to an undergraduate thesis project. Yet, advisors are not hard to find – because they want to promote a love of knowledge, but more importantly because they want to help people challenge themselves. I think of everyday heroes like Dhammika Dharmapala and Jeffrey Ladewig – junior faculty members who are busy enough with their classes and busy trying to stay ahead of the tenure process. Yet, over the past four semesters, they freely gave hundreds of hours of their time, learned about topics they had not studied in-depth before, instilled a love of knowledge into a kid who thought he knew it all, and in the process got something back out of it themselves. Dhammika and Jeff are everyday heroes.

And then there are our parents. Each of us has stories about them – good times and bad – but without a doubt, simply by being parents, they were every day heroes to us. My father is an immigrant from India. In all his years in this country, he has sought to work hard so that his children could have even greater opportunities than to which he was privileged. He has been willing to delay his retirement so that his children can be entitled to a better college education than he received. My mother has revolved the last 21 years of her life around her kids – to her they are her life and her everyday heroes, and for it, she has become a part of them. She – like

all of your mothers – will be the one who cries for you when you move away or when you accomplish great things. But, deep down they are tears of joy being shed for you by an everyday hero.

And last, let's not forget our friends. Friends because they were there for us, not just because they thought we were "cool enough" to associate with them. Our friends are the people who knew they had to study for an exam that evening, but didn't because they knew their friend needed someone to talk to. Our friends were the people who didn't judge and when someone complained about the out of style shirt you were wearing – it was your friend who was the first to wear one the next day. They are people like Kyle Noonan who puts off working on his own thesis to help me with mine. Or Gretchen Fetscher who taught me (or at least attempted to teach me) how to waltz and contra dance, simply because she thought I would find it enjoyable. Someone like Patrick Flaherty – a former state legislator turned UConn student, who has kept up the good fight after politics. People like Joe Dunaj who dropped studying for his law school exams because he knew I was stressing out. People like you and me – everyday heroes.

Let us also never forget that there are many people in this cash and carry world who are less fortunate than we are. These people – the poor and the oppressed – are everyday heroes in their own right and they possess the same dignity as any other human being. When I went to Denver this year, I had to take a city bus from the airport to where I was staying. When I got on the bus, the eyes of the person I sat next to lit up. She told me that she had no place to live and no more possessions than what she could carry with her – and that she was riding the bus that day to stay warm. My heart went out to her, but in the end, it was she who wound up helping

me. Lost in a big city, she guided me to where I was going – an everyday hero – doing what was right simply because it helped someone.

Each day, we watch the news (or at least I do) and we hear of poor and oppressed individuals living under hostile regimes. They make the best with what they have – for example, the village plagued by famine and disease, where the community helps to raise a child because the mother and father cannot – that village community is made up of everyday heroes.

The message behind all of these stories is that we can all be everyday heroes – and in reality, we have all already touched someone without knowing we made a difference to them. As we go out into the real world – and as some of us, myself included, delay the real world with more years of school – we are compelled to be everyday heroes. But just as importantly, we are compelled to recognize the everyday heroes around us and express our gratitude to them – for the work that will never be recorded in the history books, but for which we know has altered the course of history – our history.

The world in which we live is becoming increasingly divisive. We often wrongly put profits before people. We are too quick to judge and not quick enough to listen. We are willing to sacrifice ethics for expediency. Even everyday heroes are guilty of this. For this reason, the world, which we will soon enter, requires youthfulness, courage, and heroics. Robert F. Kennedy, in an address to college students of South Africa said, “The cruelties and obstacles of this swiftly changing planet will not yield to obsolete dogmas and outworn slogans.

It cannot be moved by those who cling to a present which is already dying, who prefer the illusion of security to the excitement and danger which comes with even the most peaceful

progress. This world demands the qualities of youth; not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease.”

All of these values are something that not even the best university education can cultivate. However, each of these qualities were (whether you know it or not) enhanced by your honors education – a willingness to question knowledge, to seek truth, to be exposed to a diverse range of ideas, to challenge yourself, and to adventure into the unknown. Most of us will not move the world, but if we can go out into the world with courage, youthfulness, and heroics, we can inspire hope – hope amongst individuals. And if we are truly watching what is going on around us, we will let everyday heroes inspire us back.

If anything, I have tried to tell you something you already know, which is that people are important. Individuals and individuality matter. I hope that you take what you have learned at UConn and what you learned in your thesis and make it heroic. Take the values instilled in you by the UConn community – your friends, your parents, your teachers, and even those heroes you don't know – and build upon those values. By no means are we called to be all things to all people – to be heroes everyday to everyone, but we are called to be everyday heroes.

Good luck in whatever you may do. May you continue build upon your past successes at UConn and inspire future scholars. Congratulations.