

**University of Missouri—St. Louis**  
**College of Arts and Sciences Commencement address**  
**Colleen Starkloff**  
May 16, 2015 (ceremony II)

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Good morning! Thank you Chancellor George, UM System President Tim Wolfe, and all the members of the platform party. It is an honor for me to be invited here today as Commencement Speaker.

My most sincere congratulations to the 2015 Class of the College of Arts and Sciences on this great occasion - your graduation day. And congratulations to all the family members who are here today to salute you! This is their happy day as well.

It wasn't all that long ago that I graduated from college. I received my bachelor's degree in physical therapy from St. Louis University. At that time, I, like you, was well prepared to make my way in the world. I was fortunate to have a job waiting for me. I hope that's the case for many of you, too. My job, however, unbeknownst to me, brought about a twist in what I thought was to be my career for the rest of my life.

I went to work in a nursing home. There I met the man of my dreams. He lived there, as a patient. His name was Max Starkloff. Max was injured in an automobile accident in 1959 and was quadriplegic. Because of paralysis, he could not walk; could not grip with his hands, could not bath or dress himself, could not get in and out of bed by himself, nor could he cut up his own food. He used a motorized wheelchair to get around. But he could get his arm around my waist to hug me and that was just fine with me. It was love at first sight! And I was the lucky one.

Although physical therapists learn in school how to treat people with spinal cord injuries, none of my training prepared me to live with Max. Max taught me to live with him. He also taught me about what needed to change so that people with disabilities could live their lives just like you expect to live yours—as independent, productive members of society. Having a job and a family. A home of your own. Opportunity. Lots of friends. You know—the American Dream.

But at the time that I met Max, there was no American Dream for people with disabilities. In the mid 60's in this country, while the civil rights movement was just getting its start, people with disabilities were relegated to institutions or having to remain at home with their families, as opposed to expecting to grow up, go to college, get a job and live the dream. They were being educated in separate, special schools. Most didn't have jobs, or didn't have the kind of jobs that allowed them to live the dream. They were not part of mainstream society. Rather they were segregated and viewed as second class citizens, at best. But the civil rights

movement was talking about integration. All people living, working and being together. Not separate. We now call this INCLUSION. That was what disabled people also wanted and the quest for independence, equality and inclusion for people with disabilities began. We called it the Disability Rights Movement. Max left the nursing home and took me, as his wife, with him. Together we got involved in the Disability Rights Movement and I never looked back.

Our work began with advocacy for curb cuts, and lifts on buses and trains. It advanced to push for accessible housing and access to schools and universities. When no one listened to us, advocates with disabilities chained themselves to buses and doorways to make the point that our people wanted to be, and had the right to be, included as equal citizens in this nation. We have changed laws regarding housing, transportation, air travel, education, access to buildings, employment discrimination and more.

This nation was born out of the need for independence, equality and inclusion. This nation was born to provide freedom. But as a nation, we still struggle with this concept today. You only have to look to Ferguson, New York, Florida and Ohio. Although we value inclusion we still don't really, fully embrace it.

The good news is that after 50 years of advocacy, our nation has become the world leader in rights of people with disabilities. We literally have changed the world. Now we have access to buildings, restaurants, stores, museums, streets, sidewalks, buses, trains, schools and universities. Deaf people can go to the movies and make phone calls. Blind people, and people who can't use their hands to type on a computer, have software that enables them to use a computer just as efficiently as anyone who doesn't have a disability. It's a whole new world! The one thing that still needs much greater attention is employment. The Next Big Step is access to jobs. You can't live the dream if you don't have a job.

Another bit of good news is that there are forward thinking people who develop innovative ideas and programs that enable new possibilities for inclusion to occur every day. You have such people and a wonderful program right here at UMSL. I am referring to the Succeed Program. And I want to call it out because it's a program that values and promotes inclusion for students with disabilities.

But first, how many of you have had classmates with disabilities in your grade schools, high schools and college? Let me see a show of hands. The reason you did goes back to some laws that forward thinking advocates worked hard for: The Education of All Handicapped Students Act of 1975 and then that law became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. These laws were intended to not only improve education for students with disabilities but also bring about inclusion. The idea is that if you study, play and associate with each other, perceived differences give way to what we all have in common.

I had the privilege to meet with Dr. Yasbin and Dr. Baldini two weeks ago. I wanted to learn more about this innovative program, the people who staff it and the students who participate in it. I was really impressed. The program welcomes students with disabilities to come to UMSL and to live and study with all students who come to school here. After all, the college experience is also about learning to live on your own and prepare for the next stage of your life—living out of your parents' home and making your own way in the world. So this program makes that happen for the students who graduate. I met two young men who are students in this program who have great plans for their lives. And isn't that why we are here and what we all want? I congratulate the students and faculty of the SUCCEED program for your innovation and your success. Thank you for introducing me to it. Keep up the great work!

Now what does all this have to do with your graduation today? I need your help. I came here to ask you to join me in creating a world that welcomes people with disabilities. You now have a whole world of possibilities in front of you. You have spent 4 years preparing yourselves to think critically and act definitively. YOU are the next generation of leaders. You also have within you the power to change the world. We did and it wasn't easy. But we didn't give up. Many people did not agree with us about including people with disabilities in the mainstream of life in the United States. Hard to imagine, isn't it? In a nation that was founded to welcome all, institute free speech and emancipate all who live here?

And now you are the ones with the new ideas. You are the leaders who'll change local, state, national and international policy. Some of you will run for political office. You'll impact how business runs on a daily basis. Some of you will start your own business. Some of you will make hiring decisions. Some of you will dramatically change how we communicate with each other and how we message to one another. Some of you might create the next iteration of Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. You will design new products, new buildings, new infrastructure. All of you can be agents of change. You all have the opportunity to be innovators who will bring about the next wave of what's new on the horizon. I won't even venture to guess what that will look like. But I'm so eager to see it when it happens.

That puts you in a position to help me. In a world that badly needs to include everyone, each of you can make a difference: Whether you are a CEO, a hiring manager, or a business owner, you can make the decision to actively seek out and hire qualified employees with disabilities. If you are a planner, designer, builder, or a developer, you can make the decision to include universal design features into the projects you create. If you are a teacher or a mentor, you can challenge thinking about what inclusion is and how each person can embrace it. If you are a parent, you can teach your children to accept everyone for who they are—regardless of disability, age, race, ethnicity, or gender. You don't have to be part of an organization like the Starkloff Disability Institute to be an agent for change. If you just believe that we are all created

equal and that an inclusive society works best for everyone, then decisions you make can make a difference each day. Each in your own way can ensure that inclusion is embraced in your sphere of influence.

I can't tell you how happy I am for you. There is so much opportunity in the world that you are now prepared to take charge of. Go get it! And make the world a better, more inclusive place because you are here! Again, my most sincere congratulations to all of you!

Thank you.