

**Commencement Address**  
**Saturday, December 14, 2019, 2 p.m.**  
**College of Arts and Sciences**

**Marie A. Casey**  
President  
Casey Communications, Inc.

We stand today united in celebrating your great achievement! Congratulations!

I imagine your path here has been far from straight. And that's a big part of why being with you on your graduation day is so incredibly special to me. Your persistence through adversity, expressions of kindness, and openness to big and small opportunities have built the foundation for memorable lives.

My journey also was far from straight. I am the fourth of eight children. When I was 10, I learned I would need to pay for my own education starting with senior year in Catholic high school and continuing through college.

That sounded daunting, but there were no other options. So I opened a savings account with a \$25 gift, and started regular jobs in sixth grade – babysitting my third-grade neighbor every day after school, mowing lawns, delivering ad circulars, working at a dry cleaners, and even doing our entire family's laundry for \$25 a week.

I learned that we can't control our circumstances, but we can decide whether we'll make them roadblocks or stepping stones. The work ethic I developed and my willingness to do whatever it took to earn and save enough to pay my way through school, prepared me to be an entrepreneur -- and gave me sustained persistence.

You have developed your own ways to persist through adversity, or you wouldn't be here today. I guarantee you will continue to face adversity after you leave UMSL! Remember what you've learned and practiced, and you will overcome the challenges life sends your way.

I imagine you may also be thinking today about the people who have helped you along the way. In this, you've experienced the fruits of kindness – just as I did. I came here with a fervent desire to be a journalist, but that major was only offered at Mizzou, which I could not afford. To earn money and gain writing experience, I worked as a reporter and news editor at the UMSL Current, wrote news and features for a local weekly, and built a portfolio to prove I could write.

My political science professors went out of their way to employ me for research, find great internships, and compete to win a life-changing international living scholarship.

During my final semester, I interviewed and tested with Ray Noonan, the managing editor of a St. Louis daily. He didn't have a place for me, but when Tom Finan, the publisher of a construction monthly, stopped by to see him, Ray recommended me to Tom and called me with Tom's name and number. Ray probably never gave that kindness another thought, but I have never forgotten it.

His kindness opened the door for me to learn about architecture, engineering, construction, real estate and labor-management relations – topics that weren't even on my radar – and this knowledge formed the foundation of the business I launched in 1983, five years after graduation and still going 36 years later.

I could go on with hundreds of examples ... but what's important to remember is this: regularly practicing kindness will change your life. None of us succeeds alone. Your willingness – to encourage others in word or deed, help them make connections, or listen attentively -- will light up your life and the lives of others in thrilling and remarkable ways.

As you embark from UMSL, I want to encourage you in believing there is no opportunity that is too big or too small. When I resigned my editor job to launch my business, my three anchor clients simultaneously delayed startup due to the economy.

"Hmmm," I thought. "I guess I need to find some new clients, and in the meantime, I can freelance as a journalist." So I took a few St. Louis Business Journal assignments at a pay rate significantly less than consulting work. When one story ran on the front page, the CEO of the real estate development firm I had written about brought the article to his president and said, "Hire her for our public relations and advertising." That \$75 story led to a great client whom we served for nearly 30 years and lasting friendships.

AND it was equally important that I said YES to the big scary opportunities that came, believing on faith that my team and I would figure them out – and we did!

See what life offers, be willing to explore a little deeper and practice your courage muscle. Say YES to opportunities that may not fit your exact specifications, but could lead to something beyond your wildest dreams.

I want to leave you with a personal story about a woman who persisted through adversity, practiced extraordinary kindness, and courageously accepted challenges and opportunities – just like you. She lost her mother at age two. At 49, she found herself on her own, responsible for six children, with a teacher's salary of \$17,000 a year.

As she grew older, she lost her hearing, then her sight, but continued to walk over a mile a day and live independently, trusting in the goodness of others. Her protection was the echo of what she had practiced all her life. Her heart saw deeply into others' hearts. Her faith in God sustained her through strokes, broken bones and the other hard work of aging. This woman – my mother – died at 93 in late September, and as I sat with her in her final weeks, days and hours, I recognized that life is really all about LOVE and RELATIONSHIPS. When everything else is stripped away, that is what remains in the end.

Her actions showed me how to worry less and trust more, and that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.

When we are willing to keep learning and take risks, anything is possible. We always have more capacity to give and to achieve than we realize.

You have what it takes. When adversity knocks, persist. As you find your way on life's journey, may you encounter true friends and joy in your relationships. May the path designed for you, with your most splendid talents, unmistakably emerge to shine in glorious light. And may you share and receive loving encouragement as you and others clarify direction and explore possibilities. Go out and be who you were made to be.