Los Angeles STEM Bio-Flex Graduation Keynote

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Good afternoon and congratulations! I feel so privileged to join your graduation celebration. What an amazing accomplishment!

I know, I know, you're asking yourself “Who are you?” In fact, I'm asking myself, "How did a poor farm girl from Saskatchewan, Canada, whose family didn't get an indoor toilet until she was in grade one, get here? How did I survive with a rare kidney disease and organ transplant? How did I get involved in tech? How did I check off so many things on my bucket list, like running marathons and climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro? How did I get here?"

The short answer is education and curiosity. The long answer is more complex.

As I told you, I’m Canadian. I grew up in a 100-year-old farmhouse, not an igloo, in southern Saskatchewan, funny name, I know. Saskatchewan is above North Dakota and yes, it is very flat. There are a lot of mosquitoes in the summer, and winters are brutal, but the prairie sunsets are breathtaking. I am the 5th of six children and I grew up poor. We lived under the poverty line, somehow surviving on about twenty thousand a year ($20,000) ...for a family of 8. We raised and grew our own food and got by. I took a bus half an hour to a small school in a tiny nearby town, usually dressed in my older sister’s and sometimes older brothers’ hand-me-downs. I was a smart kid, but I couldn’t ever do after-school sports or band or other activities, because we couldn’t afford it and because I had chores to do on the farm.

But being poor wasn’t the worst part of my childhood. When I was 10, my mom had chronic kidney failure and needed dialysis. I remember being scared and wondering if she was going to die. Because we lived in a remote area, she had to take the bus into a city for treatments, traveling 2-hours roundtrip, 3 times a week. This meant she wasn’t around a lot and was sick when she was home. My father didn’t know how to cope, and so he drank, and became an alcoholic. With my 3 older siblings gone, I became the caregiver for both my parents AND my younger sister Marie. I was just a kid, but my parents just weren’t emotionally and physically able to care for us.

My escape was school, and I knew that if I was going to have a better life, education was going to be my ticket. How did I know this? When my mom got sick, my youngest brother Luc, my sister Marie and I stayed with my godparents and their four boys in the big city for 3 weeks. My uncle and aunt were both teachers so I guess you could say they were middle class, but they seemed rich to me. Their home was filled with calm, laughter, love. We would read together every day from books and encyclopedias. My aunt taught me basic piano chords to play simple songs. I enjoyed trips to Dairy Queen for an ice cream in the back of a station wagon. I slept in blankets without holes in them and twirled around in pretty brand-new dresses I got to pick out myself. Those 3 weeks as a 10-year old showed me how an education could afford me the kind of happy, comfortable life I thought only existed on TV.

After high school, I left the farm at 17 and moved to the "city" which was maybe 200,000 people, probably similar in size to Torrance and Inglewood, but for me, it was HUGE compared to the town of 400 by the farm. I rented a room in a house and started university. I say this like it was easy, but it wasn't. I just knew I had to do it, and I was determined not to go back to the farm. I got student loans and worked part-time, mostly waitressing so I could get discounts on good food besides ramen. It's sexist to think about it now, but most people expected me to become a nurse or a teacher. Not me. I wanted a business degree in marketing. It was an ego hit because unlike my small high school, at university I was no longer the smartest kid in class. I had to work while I went to school, which meant it took me 5 years to get my bachelor's but I did it.

So, I'm working hard and going to school, and then, when I was 19 in my 2nd year of university, I was diagnosed with the same genetic kidney disease as my mom. I was crushed, angry, resentful. There was very little information - this was before the internet exploded. I had no idea if I would even live to get married, or have children, or see retirement. I would probably need a dialysis machine to keep me alive, or I would die before I got old. At 19, I thought 50 was old…I'll be 54 in a few months, so I guess I'm old?!

But I was still alive. There was enough time to start my career and I went for it. I worked in banking, real estate, oil and gas, forestry, software, even lingerie until eventually I landed in life sciences with Thermo Fisher Scientific. It was 2002 and my first job when I moved to the USA. Being open to different industries and roles is how I learned what I liked and didn't like. I was smart and observant. Early on, I noticed technology was up-and-coming, and I knew I'd be good at it, so I took roles that exposed me to all areas, even though I was often the only female on the team. I learned that sometimes you must create opportunities for yourself because they will not be handed to you, and I encourage you to find your own chances, too.

Okay, so I'm now in my late 20s and I'm kicking butt in my job. Took advantage of work education benefits to get an MBA and volunteered for projects that allowed me to travel. But I also started thinking "I'm running out of time," because I still have this deadly disease. I wanted to see what life was like outside of Canada and physically challenge my body and mind. So I started off small like learning how to run a 6 mile/10km race which progressed to several competitive 26-mile marathons and 199-mile relay races. I volunteered to crew on a racing sailboat and felt the exhilaration of the wind and the sea. I celebrated with orange Fanta after completing a 7-day trek to summit Mt. Kilimanjaro, the tallest peak in Africa at 19,400 ft. I taught a tribesman how to play Crazy 8's in the Serengeti. I surfed the powerful waves off the coast of West Timor in Indonesia. I woke up to the sound of howler monkeys in the Amazon jungle. I was less concerned about saving for retirement and more focused on living my life, so I had no regrets. I wanted exceptional moments I could draw on to lift me up… when my body would eventually let me down.

Then the reality of dying hit me like a brick when I was added to the deceased donor organ registry. I had less than 15% kidney function at the age of 39. So, what does that feel like? I was exhausted and freezing cold 24/7. I couldn't run, climbing the stairs to my bedroom left me winded. My eyes and skin began to yellow, food, even water, tasted like metal. My head was in a constant fog and I barely peed because my kidneys were not flushing out the waste. My past endurance racing helped me muster up strength to go to work because I needed the income and medical benefits, but I would collapse into bed when I got home and sleep all weekend. I was told to write my will. What? I'm 39 and need to write a will?

When I was down to 10%, I was asked if there was anyone who might consider giving their kidney to me as a living donor. My best friend Conna was the first to offer me her kidney and even though we were unrelated, we were a match. I will never forget that emotional phone call – it filled me with hope…and fear. You see, I've known Conna for over 30 years and she always wanted to be a mom. She had had a premature baby Jake a few months earlier so I told her no. I couldn't live with myself if she had complications and couldn't be a mom to Jake. She assured me everything would be ok. She felt helpless when Jake was in ICU for 1.5 months and this was her way to pay it forward. Plus, she wanted to see me cross more finish lines and add more stamps to my passport. It's still sometimes weird to think someone else' organ is inside of me keeping me alive. It remains to this day the most important lesson I learned in humility, and how giving and receiving graciously benefits both people.

I'm lucky because I now have 2 birthdays. My "re-birthday" is Nov 5 when Conna saved my life with her kidney and this year is will be 13 years. I still feel some tiny relief when I hear the alarm in the morning knowing I am alive for another day. Living with an organ transplant is not easy and it's expensive. It's a lot of specialists. I take daily anti-rejection pills that have nasty side effects like hand tremors and bouts of cancer. Oh, and I hate needles, but I can't avoid them. I had to give up dreams like crossing the Boston Marathon finish line, making it to Everest Base Camp or the hardest of them all, having my own children. But I honestly wouldn't change a thing.

Look, I know life isn't easy. You obviously do too because you are getting through high school…using distant learning…plus graduating the Bio-Flex Pre-Apprenticeship program…in the middle of a global pandemic!!!

You can do hard things, and you can survive and thrive. So, here's what I would like to share as you start this exciting next chapter:

- Your life path may not always be the one you envisioned. And sometimes you may not get a choice. Approach these changes with curiosity. I encourage you to continually educate yourself in whatever forms that may take. Knowledge truly is power.
- The STEM aspects you have learned will and can help people like me who remain hopeful for innovations like one less needle, stem cell 3D printed organs, cures for genetic diseases. I am currently taking night classes for a Patient Advocacy certificate (shocking, more education, right?!). I have a feeling I am going to be working with some of you to improve the patient experience.
- Third, ask questions. If there's someone in a job you are thinking about, reach out! I didn't think to do that when I was in high school or early on in my career. You may think your new mentor and others are too busy, but we want to help. You will be surprised how much they can learn from you too!
- Don't let others put you in a box or label you. Remember I was a poor farm girl with a rare kidney disease, but I knew there were bigger things out there for me. And I was right. Imagine if I'd been too afraid to leave the farm, get a career in tech or agree to a kidney transplant. I wouldn't be alive, let alone living in LA! This is what I'm saying: Not everything will work out as planned but each success and setback has a learning opportunity that will empower you.
- And lastly: You are stronger, more resilient and wiser than you realize. Think boldly and take risks. Trust your knowing, know your value. No one, and no single experience, can define who you will become and what you can achieve, regardless of your circumstances in this exact moment.

Thank you for inviting me today to join in your celebration. I wish you the very best!