

Katie Shipman's Speech for Commencement Class of 2009

Good morning everyone! Congratulations class of 2009!
I can't believe it's actually that time!

Time to celebrate all that we have accomplished. Time to reflect on all that we have learned. And time to go after all those dreams we've been reaching for. It is so exciting for me to realize that we are within reach of grasping our dreams and making them realities. Thank you to our families, our friends, and all the amazing professors here at Miami; we are supported, equipped, and confident in what each and every one of us has to offer this world. This division, the school of Education, Health and Society is unlike any other division at Miami. It's the best in my opinion! For the last four years our professors have been striving to create leaders who will address the issues and opportunities facing tomorrow's schools, communities, and families.

Throughout my time at Miami, I have had professors who have not only challenged me beyond my comfort level...that's how I got this job today, but also professors who truly cared. Some of my greatest memories were when they would meet me for tea at a local coffee shop to talk about what I've been learning, and how I was doing. Or the times when my classmates and I were invited into their homes, they made dinner for us, and brought to life the issues we were learning about in class. We had real discussions, and established real relationships that have inspired me to pursue my passions of joining the Peace Corps and teaching in the inner-city. Because of their encouragement and belief in my abilities I have confidence in myself. As a future educator, some of the greatest role models and teachers are sitting here today...and I hope to do exactly what they have done. Make a difference. I will open my heart, open my mind, and give all that I am to not just educate my students, but to love all those I come in contact with, to believe in others, and know that each life can make a difference in this world! I know that not all of us will be teachers one day, but what I do know is that all of us will be a part of a community, a family, and will have the opportunity to leave impressions on each life we come in contact with. Throughout my life, many hands have left an imprint deep within my heart, and have shaped me into a future leader in our society. Today, I want to share with you my story, one that I have learned from, and one I hope will open your eyes and your hearts to see how each of your lives can impact this world.

I grew up in the small town of Middlefield, in Northeast Ohio. A town where horse and buggies trot down the village streets and Amish farmland stretches for miles. Growing up in a large family of seven, my family has taught me to be patient, understanding, and compassionate. It is because of them that I am who I am today. My parents fostered my creativity and imagination and instilled in me the value of serving others in all I do. They never once held me back from chasing after my dreams. Ever since childhood, I can remember playing school and pretending I was the teacher. That childhood dream has never escaped me and when the time came to choose a major I decided to concentrate in Special Education. I decided to go somewhere that would challenge me to become more independent and step out of my comfort zone.

Well, Miami met all my expectations. My mission of being challenged was fulfilled when I studied abroad in Seville, Spain...Culture Shock! I did not speak a lick of Spanish, but to make things worse, my host family did not speak a bit of English! The discomfort and the frustrations became an everyday adventure. The flexibility and open mindedness I gained prepared me for the next challenge...living in Over the Rhine, one of Cincinnati's most struggling neighborhoods.

Over the Rhine, a place where many locals fear to go became a place I called my home, became a place where I found myself. I spent my days student teaching in the only public school, Rothenberg Preparatory Academy. I spent my nights learning from the faces in the community and living in solitude with some of the most amazing people I have even met. Over the Rhine was a place I found joy and complete purpose. Each day I would wake up excited about the opportunity to impact young lives in a way that was so different than what they had ever experienced. Many of the children grew up in broken homes... Broken financially, emotionally, and physically.

I had always heard of what it was like to teach in the inner-city, but to actually LIVE there and do it was a whole other level! Not only did my students have special needs, but also all children follow after what they see. Like monkey see monkey do! Children look for someone to look up to and follow after all they know. They see brothers and uncles out working the drug markets; friends and siblings dropping out school. They believe they won't amount to anything more than what they see around them, and lose hope at a very early age. But what I found is that these children were brilliant, they were creative, and eager to learn when given the trust and respect they deserved. They blossomed when they were fed encouragement and hope for a better future.

Living in community with my students, being able to see what they see opened my eyes to raw truth. Out my bedroom window, was the true story of many lives we often ignore. Out my window I'd see the poverty at my door step. On my way to school I'd see people sleeping on the stoops of abandoned houses; homeless wandering aimlessly on the streets; and children dancing on the concrete slab of a back yard. What must their life be like? What would it feel like if I was in that position? Everyday I'd try to answer these questions. I'd try to wrap my mind around something that I have not even come close to experiencing. Who am I kidding, a white small town girl... I had no clue! I can pretend that I can empathize, but really I've never experienced what some people have experienced. At night I'd cry tears of sorrow and could feel my heart changing. I had never known a world without hope; a world without acceptance. Opportunities. Blessings. It was painful, seeing the poor circumstances of peoples lives; it was heartbreaking to witness children without the supervision of a parent and it was gut wrenching to see people digging in garbage for food, but what was the saddest is that not many people do much about it. Instead, some people turn their heads, don't look people in the eye, lock their car doors, and continue driving back to their comfortable lives. For me, I would rather choose to see all those things and choose to live along side the people in Over the Rhine because in the end, we are all equal. We are all humans with the same desire to be accepted, loved and acknowledged.

A passion for helping others and understanding their situations became so strong that I can not live my life without doing something about it. Looking back, I ask myself, "What can WE do? What do I want to remember about these lives? What have they taught me? And what lesson can my experience be for all of us?" They have taught me to walk beside them, to not live in fear of the "what if..." To listen carefully to their story, realize that we have more in common than not, instead of feeling sorry for them. They taught me to be patient; Patient in understanding the complexities of this world and the hands that hold us all together. They taught me to appreciate everything I've been given and acknowledge all the blessings in my life. They taught me to love.

To truly love by placing others needs above my own, and treating people the way I want to be treated. They taught me to dream, and think of the possibilities. To pursue my passions by taking action, and advocating for those who don't have a voice and are often forgotten. And lastly, they taught me to be me; to be confident in my story and where I come from. Never will I forget their stories, forever, I am changed by the lives that I encountered and the hearts that changed mine.

Today, I am the voice for everyone in Over the Rhine who has impacted my life. Today, they would like me to say, "be thankful! Find joy in all things, especially the joy of learning. It is a gift!" Today, after we walk across this stage and leave this town, we will all hold a precious gift in our hands. The gift of education, only 1% of the world has a college degree. This degree we possess is not a small prize; it is an enormous blessing that comes with a burden. A burden to speak for ALL those who are often forgotten. A few days ago I was sitting in Washington Park in Over the Rhine with my friend Jessica, and it dawned on me...I have a burden. Because I've lived with, witnessed what happens in places like Over the Rhine and have listened to their stories... I have to advocate for those who may never get the chance to be heard. It is my responsibility to use this knowledge and education I have to empower those without a voice. To listen to each voice carefully. Giving all I have to share my blessings with others.

And now, that we, the class of 2009, all come together and are faced with this road ahead of us, A road that has the potential to lead us anywhere... We have to decide where that will be. What I hope is that we all choose a path of self-reliance, "leaving nothing to chance" but taking on the obstacle to open our eyes, see the needs around us, build relationships with each life we come in contact with, challenge ourselves beyond our own limits, and see how much of a difference our lives can make! So let's join together today and recognize that if our passions are deep enough, no matter what they are, or where they will take us, we can do anything!" Thank You for listening to my story and the story of those who have left an imprint deep within my heart. Are you listening to the story of those around you? Are you telling their story and being their voice? How will you make a difference in someone else's life? I know you can and I am confident that we all will.

Congratulations Class of 2009!

Thank you.