

Grace Arredondo - 2021

Happy graduation day distinguished alumni, guests, family and friends, Chowan University faculty, staff, and the extraordinary class of 2021! My name is Grace Arredondo and I am honored to stand before you today as a graduation commencement speaker. I have so many to thank in this sea of smiling faces, but I'll allot this precious moment to thank my mom, dad, and younger brother, for I can surely say, I would not be the woman I am today without their love and support.

Fellow graduates, today is a defining milestone in our lives. And I felt a lot of pressure while writing this speech to share something uniquely profound but wholeheartedly relatable. It is no secret or debate that we have proven ourselves to be one of the most resilient classes in Chowan history. We have all fought battles, both known and unknown by those around us. And I am here today to say that despite your struggles, you have made it to this moment. So find strength in having overcome these obstacles. Although they may have caused pain and hardship, they did not keep you from accomplishing this important dream.

I am addressing all of you today, hoping to be a source of inspiration. That as I remark on points in my life where I have overcome feeling inferior and suffered life's tribulations, you will identify in your own personal way with my struggles and journey to this stage.

I was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina to hardly a middle-class family, living in the same house since I was three years old. As a child, my parents were devoted to making sure my brother and I never had to carry the burden of knowing our financial state. They did without basic needs so he and I could attend a private Christian school from kindergarten to graduation.

I have also had to overcome my fair share of bullies, specifically those who targeted me as a biracial woman. In elementary school, I remember being so eager to do school projects on my Mexican heritage. I'd make my abuelita's secret salsa and pass around the classroom the few remaining photos of my paternal family living in Valle Hermoso. I would stand tall and share my father's story of immigrating to the United States from Mexico with his family as a child. See, since my dad could be employed at fifteen years old in the trenches of the Chicago workforce, he has never stopped working to provide for his family. But I found myself acknowledging this beautiful narrative less and less when the snobbish, rich kids asked me to come mow their lawns on a weekly basis or when I learned that the new nickname I'd acquired was actually a particularly hateful, hispanic racial slur. Although the mistreatment I've endured is nothing compared to my father's, I know the struggle of overcoming what it feels like to be lesser than others based on a lineage that I am now openly proud to identify with.

Along with these struggles, I have had to contend with being diagnosed with ADHD and accompanying OCD tendencies, as well as spending several years bitter with the grief and anger of my sweet grandfather's murder in an assisted living facility. And like each one of you, I have fought to overcome crippling insecurities, devastating heartbreaks, and moments where I considered letting the dreams fade away. Even during my college career, I have had to push through trials that threatened to keep me from succeeding. However, I have remained resolved to not be a victim of these difficulties. As I stand here today, I can wholeheartedly say I am thankful that the road was not easy because this moment would not have been so sweet.

Although right now has amounted to more than merely four years in the making, they are defining markers of the progress we've made to be here today. Freshman year, we had to find our place. Sophomore year, we made a plan. Junior year, we carried on, with the end in sight. And senior year, we managed to finish strong, all along the way, finding our purpose.

We have made it in spite of the most stressful, and in some ways, crushing year we could have anticipated. Senior year is a celebration of lasts, preparing for a new set of firsts. For three years we've put in the work, looking forward to our turn to be recognized, our time to shine. So maybe it's not the celebration we imagined, or the senior year we anticipated, it is still our time. Our opportunity to embrace adversity and let the fire do its refining. In a period where we competed for empty bleachers and attended virtual events, remember our class. That we were the ones who achieved beyond the fulfilling glory. We did this for us. Our future. And that was enough.

Although it may feel hollow for those who have gone before us, having achieved the goals we still dream of, to tell us to carry on despite Covid-19's limitations, know that every generation has shared in a struggle of their own. Hurdles come in many forms. Covid-19 is ours. But we have endured, we have overcome and we are better for it. So, I urge you today, don't look at this year for its lost opportunities. We are entering into a new chapter of our lives with a wiser understanding of how to cherish the simplest pleasures. Hugs, gatherings, celebrations, smiles, and normalcy. The way we have responded, reacted, endured, and risen above says everything about who we are.

So today, as we have reminisced on a year, or perhaps a lifetime, of triumphs forged through setbacks, be encouraged that we were born for such a time as this. To be the fresh emerging leaders, bursting onto the scene of a weary world that so desperately requires our light, energy, ingenuity, resilience, and our vision. And as fulfilling as today may seem, senior year is not the end. Graduation is not the ultimate goal. We are to take everything this school and life and the world have taught us and go forth. This is our launching pad. Now take flight!

Thank you, and congratulations!