

Good Evening:

Thank you very much for this honour. I will never forget the gift that attending Canadian Martyrs and St. Mary's was to me. My education, by talented teachers, administrators and support staff is what makes everything I do possible. Thank you for opening my eyes and teaching me to question and seek answers. Thank you to my loving family and friends for supporting me through all number of challenges so that I could be here tonight, in front of you, receiving this honour.

Graduates, you don't know who I am, and the likelihood is that many of you could care less. I probably wouldn't care who I was if I were in your shoes. I had third row tickets to the violent femmes at Canada's Wonderland for my graduation night. When I told my parents I was going to see the femmes with Ryan Sheppard instead of grad, they said they didn't think that was such a hot idea. I went to grad.

Since you don't know who I am, I think the fastest way to explain what I do is that I spend my days asking difficult questions of people. Why are people sleeping on the street, and why are we paying police and private security guards to move them along instead of just housing them? Why do people's lives count less if they are addicted, mentally ill, aboriginal, HIV positive, or poor? Why are we building stadiums and convention centres instead daycare centres and affordable housing?

Tonight, graduates, I'm going to issue a challenge to you to ask questions too. You are going out into the world. You have the blessing and the curse of a Catholic education. Blessing, because you will see the injustices of the world and feel compelled to find answers. Curse, because you will see the injustices of the world and feel compelled to find answers. There are probably other things you'd rather do, I don't know if you know who the violent femmes are, for example, but they do put on a fantastic show. Maybe you'd rather do that than solve the injustices of the world.

Graduates, I didn't always ask myself hard questions. Sometimes I still don't. When I went to St. Mary's, and this is hard to admit, I remember calling people fags to hurt them. I'm sure you wouldn't do that today, but maybe you say "That's so gay" when you mean that you don't like something. Maybe it's easy to get mixed messages about what it means for people to be gay, whether or not gay people should be teachers or married to other gay people or whether they should be parents. While you are going into a world that decided those issues a while ago, things might seem a little unclear right now.

I'm going to ask you, graduates, what does it mean to you, tonight, to know that some of your colleagues here on the stage are gay, and that they're getting these same unclear messages? What does it mean if you're gay yourself getting these messages?

Is there a justice issue for us here? Graduates, what is your responsibility as compassionate students of the Catholic board, who have been taught to question, to think about compassion and true equality? What are we do to in a situation like this? I ask you these hard questions without pretending to have the answers for you.

I will be getting on a plane in three days and going back to Vancouver. Whether your school and community will see an equality or justice issue here depends on you, and how you define your faith, and how you define your community. Graduates, if you lead with compassion, truth and equality, I promise you that people will follow. What choice will they have? You're the future. You'll be around after the old

people like me are dead. You will be the leaders then, why not try it out now? You can speak, as well as listen. You can lead, and I admit it is not as easy as following, and people will tell you you can't, and you shouldn't, and it can be scary, but you can lead, and it gets easier every time.

Let me assure you that while the world appears fixed in a certain understanding of things, it isn't fixed. The world has an understanding that people who are addicted to drugs are junkies. That they are junk. That people who are refugees fleeing war, torture and starvation are queue jumpers who should go back where they came from. That prisoners in jail are human garbage, that if they get HIV and Hepatitis in jail, then so be it, and the sooner they die, the better.

These perspectives that seem so fixed are the product of closed minds that have never learned compassion or equality. As graduates of this board, you have no such defence. This is the blessing and the curse. You have been taught compassion and with courage you can help others have compassionate views. You can actually change those views. I've seen it happen. It really works.

I'm a bit of a downer tonight on a celebration night, but I also want to be an upper. When the Board told me that I could speak to you tonight I couldn't believe it. I said, What? You're going to let me speak to the graduates? I was so excited. I want to tell you that there will be an opportunity for you to help deliver compassion and justice in your life. That you can seize it, and that you can make a difference in this world. For me, my opportunity came when a guy with two earrings and a goatee came up to me at my call to the bar ceremony and offered me a job at Pivot to work in Vancouver's poorest neighbourhood. I jumped at it.

I'm not a special guy, I wanted to go to the femmes instead of graduation. You can make this choice too. It will present itself to you, and I hope you take it. You don't have to live in a burlap sack and give every worldly possession up, you can pay your bills and have a family and all of these things, but you can also make justice and compassion happen.

As you are graduates of this school board, I am literally begging you to help move us forward in a vision of equality, fairness and justice. Nobody else is better placed than you to welcome those at the edges to come in and share in the wealth of our society. If you do take on this challenge, I will be standing shoulder to shoulder with you on the front lines, and so will hundreds of thousands of others. You will recognize the faces of some of your teachers and colleagues on the front lines. This fight for rights and equality is quite seriously a fight, and one that will be won with your love and care and patience and courage. The world has too many cowards. Please do not join them in their fear and their silence.

Thank you again for this great honour this evening, receiving this award means a great deal to me, but even more meaningful is the opportunity to ask you to step up and make a difference. Be courageous and compassionate and true in everything you do, and I will do everything I can, many others will too, to work with you in achieving your vision of fairness and justice. I cannot wait to do that.

Thank you again.