

Maddie Henson, Class of 2023, President of the Student Government Association

Commencement Greeting (as prepared) – Sunday, May 21, 2023

We made it, folks - everybody, get out your phones and delete the BlackBoard app, we're safe now.

Before I begin, I would like to dedicate this speech to those who couldn't be physically with us today, including Kayla Noonan, Cody Surprise, Maisie Talbot, Sam Cariddi, and other family and friends of the UVM community.

As previously stated, my name is Maddie Henson and I just finished up my term as Student Government Association President. A little bit about myself, I was born in Chicago, grew up in Tennessee, and then moved to North Carolina during high school. And in Fall of 2019, my journey in Vermont began. 4 years later, here I am getting a bachelors in neuroscience with a minor in international politics, with a presidency under the belt— a pretty wild ride if you ask me.

I found UVM through a google search – truly – and decided “why not”? and applied. I was also recently reminded by my parents that I never actually told them that I applied to UVM and that one day I randomly told them that I had been accepted to a college in a state that no one in my family had been to. Needless to say, the scholarships from UVM were a convincing peace offering to them. At the first-year activities fest, I stumbled upon the Student Government Association booth, and I again said “why not?”. Surprise, I stuck with it for all 4 years. This mentality – the “why not?” – has gotten me pretty far in life. It's not reckless or fearless, but one that bases my decisions in trust within myself.

My time did not come without its challenges, though, as I'm sure all of you can relate. The deadlines, the papers, the exams and especially within a pandemic, we have collectively struggled to conceptualize this new world. But you and I are not accustomed to backing down from a challenge.

My personal struggles acted as catalyst for personal change and a significant contributor to my personal and professional success. Through a supportive community of family, friends, professors, advisors, psychiatrists, therapists, and hundreds of other people, I was able to learn to love myself, amidst the confusion, and as cliché as that may seem.

One way I demonstrate this love to myself is actually very simple - I buy flowers for myself every week. Yes, yes, I know but stay with me. I buy them for no other special occasion than myself. My dining room table is no longer barren, but instead adorned with the epitome of elegance; the Trader Joe's \$12.99 Seasonal bouquet. On the good days, these flowers serve as a celebration of my successes. On the bad days, they cheer me up and serve as a bright spot. I found out very quickly that when you give flowers to yourself, it's not just to the present day you. It's also to 7-year-old you who just scuffed your knees on playground and is in pain, but maybe also 87-year-old you who just beat Frances and Judi for the 1st time at bingo (you had been trying for weeks). Flowers are deserved on both of those occasions. Juvenile as it may seem, those flowers honor the person you were in the past – the good times and bad – and serve as a commitment to the success of you in the future. Again, my experience is universal. Young or old, here or at home, we are all with ourselves for the rest of our lives, whether we like it or not, so once a week, we all have to drive to Trader Joe's and grab the flowers – they're sort of in the middle of the stand. No, but seriously, try making a commitment to yourself like that – your own 'bouquet of flowers' per se.

Delineating from the floral theme, I think the mindset of “why not?” is one that is a result of learning how to lead with wonder. Not one with fear or unreasonable expectations, but one with genuine curiosity for the world.

This is the type of life we all owe ourselves – one rooted in admiration and service for ourselves and others. A life so beautiful that nothing feels wasted. That no combination of words in any language known to humankind can describe it. That we are irreverent to fear, regardless of the circumstances. And like those mountains, we will not budge. That is the life we are destined for. And looking out at us now, I know we will not stand for keeping things “as is” because we fully understand that “as is” doesn't always cut it.

I want to end off our final moments together with a recognition to the thousands of people who have gotten us here today. Whether they are here on the green, tuning in online, or with us in our hearts, the sacrifices on our behalf are immense, and something we should not take lightly. The radiance of this moment in time is incomprehensible, so please now and throughout this big day, look around at one another, maybe even take a look at your neighbors now, and recognize the small details – the ones not photographed or recorded. Just be in the moment and remember not to discount the ordinary because the beauty of it did not beg for your attention.

Thank you, Class of 2023, and now with flowers in hand, go lead with wonder into the world.