

Scholarship Appreciation Luncheon • May 10th, 2018

Good afternoon, everyone! Thank you to President Rose for the introduction, and to David for those inspiring remarks. I also want to thank the offices of Stewardship and Events, Dining, Facilities, Housekeeping, and everyone else who's making this happen today. I've been very fortunate to have jobs here on campus that connect me with the people behind the scenes that really make this place tick.

I am so honored and humbled to be standing up here today. I actually boast a perfect attendance record for this luncheon, so after listening to the speakers the last three years, I can't believe I'm the one up here now. To be here with all of you is a really beautiful part of the finale of my Bowdoin experience. I've been penning love letters to this school and its community in my head for a while now, trying to make sense of my emotions before I leave. I could give multiple speeches built around funny anecdotes and moments that made my heart burst. However, in order to truly express the depth of my gratitude for the people and resources that brought and kept me here at Bowdoin, I need to introduce you to where I'm from.

I was born and raised in the Mid-Ohio Valley, nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. It is rural, it is insular; it easily could have been the model for the portrait painted by J.D. Vance in "Hillbilly Elegy". Breaking news is often about a meth lab bust; I know people who have lost loved ones in the heroin epidemic. School was called off several days each year in deference to hunting season because so many people would've skipped anyway, but attendance was always perfect on "Drive Your

Tractor to School Day”. Everyone and their mother (literally) would line the school drive to watch the tractors roll past, American and confederate flags waving side by side. The drivers would park, dismount, and carry their feed sacks-turned-backpacks into class just as the bell rang.

At the end of every school day, my little brother and I would ride the bus through the valleys and the hollers for roughly two hours, memorizing every single word to every single country song on the radio through osmosis. The bus dropped us off at the intersection of Stanleyville and Dalzell Roads, where my mom waited in her Subaru, listening to NPR. On a nice spring day, we might’ve taken a quiet walk down to the nearby pond, which was always full of frogs and newts. I wrote my main college application essay on this school/home transition, realizing that I grew up in two completely different worlds.

My parents have managed to build careers around what they love to do. My dad, among many things, is the editor of Bird Watcher’s Digest, the host of a bird watching podcast, and the leader of birding fieldtrips around the world. My mom, equally versatile, is a natural history writer, water color artist, and volunteer songbird rehabilitator. As a child, I traveled around the country with my family to bird festivals where my parents were hired as speakers, trip leaders, and musicians. The years of my youth were spent chasing sparrows on the prairies of North Dakota, looking for warblers in the mountains of West Virginia, and spotting puffins off the coast of this great state. While my childhood was unique and rich with these experiences, reality hit home for me when I began to look at the sticker prices of colleges. To no one’s surprise, the cost of

higher education was far outpacing the income associated with professional birdwatching. I clearly remember the night of my first college acceptance, to a different small, liberal arts school—my mother, while obviously elated for me, shook her head and held back tears while looking at the school's financial aid offer. It just wouldn't be feasible.

Then came Bowdoin's acceptance. It was no secret that this was the one I'd been desperately hoping for. I reminded my parents probably 100 times that the financial aid was loan-free. That I would never have to pay back anything Bowdoin gave me. While my enrollment at any private liberal arts college was going to be a major stretch for our family, my parents saw how badly I wanted this. On the night we paid my admissions deposit, my dad—always the optimist—pulled me aside and promised that he would do everything in his power to ensure that I could live out this dream. This was where my experience diverged from that of my high school classmates.

The social and familial dynamics in the Mid-Ohio Valley are probably best described using the old metaphor of crabs in a bucket. Basically, in a bucket of live crabs, any one of them could climb out at any time, but all of the other crabs pull climbers back down, “ensuring the group's collective demise.” Essentially, the idea is “if I can't have it, neither can you.”

When I was entering 7th grade, my parents and I attended an orientation to find my locker and get the lay of the land. We were instructed to find our homerooms and meet our teachers so we'd be ready to go on the first day. The whole night is a blur, but one moment stands out clearly. I walked into the pre-algebra classroom with one of my

good friends from elementary school, as we had both tested into this higher level of math. Her mom chased after us and grabbed her. In front of everyone—the students, the parents, and the teacher—she yelled “What are you doing in this classroom? You know you can’t do this kind of math! You belong in the basic class!” The switch to Math 7, mandated by her mother despite her test results, changed her trajectory for the rest of high school, ensuring that she could never take calculus. My friend went on to attend one of the large public schools in Ohio for a couple of years, until she dropped out and returned to our area to live at home.

Several years later, in my junior year of high school, I had my first college-related meeting with our school’s one guidance counselor. I knew someone at the time who was a senior at a rigorous private academy in the east, and through him I learned the names of a bunch of small, liberal arts colleges that sounded much more appealing to me than a large university in Ohio. When I mentioned Bowdoin to my counselor, she replied “Well, have you heard of Oberlin?” This desire to keep the youth of the Mid-Ohio Valley close to home was pervasive and insidious, and I heard it in the voices of my friends as we discussed our options for higher education. When I returned for spring break during my first year at Bowdoin, I ran into one of my old friends who I’d known since kindergarten. In all the years we spent together, he never wavered in his desire to be an air traffic controller, and had enrolled in a program at a college roughly two hours away to pursue his dream. I asked him how things were going, and he shook his head and looked at the ground. He said “I’m not like you, Phoebe. I can’t leave this place.”

So they stay. And they build lives of their own in the spaces carved out for them by their parents. One third of my graduating high school class of 78 people has children of their own now, and a handful of them have two. I recently saw a post online made by one such classmate, dedicated to everyone turning 20 and celebrating the fact that they “beat” teenage pregnancy—roughly paraphrased, it read: “When you’re 35 and awake at 3 am changing diapers and making bottles, I’ll be sleeping peacefully while my grown children make their own food.” ...They got me there. It’s a different world.

Meanwhile, I came here. By virtue of my parents’ selflessness and faith in me, and thanks in large part to the scholarships I received, I am standing here in front of you today, wrapping up my Bowdoin education. I’ve learned about oceans and volcanoes; I’ve learned a romance language and a computer language. I have studied abroad, and I have learned how to write and communicate effectively. I’ve made lifelong friends who I love with all my heart, and I’ve been encouraged and supported by brilliant faculty and staff who are leaders in what they do.

A couple of times, I’ve returned home and tried to talk with high-achieving students from my high school about the possibility of them attending a college like Bowdoin. The answer is always the same: they’re going to stay in-state because it’s cheaper and closer to home. And I cannot fault them. No one has given them the boost to see out, over the lip of that bucket of crabs. They don’t know that there is generous loan-free financial aid waiting for a student just like them. They don’t know that they can put down roots elsewhere without destroying the ones they’ve grown over their first 18

years. To be honest, I didn't fully know that either. But I was allowed to try, and I sure found a great place to land.

Because of you, I am here. Thank you.