

2019 Baccalaureate  
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So, here we are, four years later. And, after beginning our time at Bowdoin together, you are headed off. Great, but bittersweet for me. I'll have more to say about that tomorrow at Commencement.

For now ...

I'd like to ask you to hold three thoughts in your head—bowling, community, and Iris. I will try to connect the dots.

First, bowling. About twenty years ago, the noted political scientist, Robert Putnam, wrote a rich empirical study called "Bowling Alone." In it, he observed that we are becoming more isolated, and that the traditional institutions of community had diminished or were disappearing. The bonds of community in America were eroding.

We are lucky. Bowdoin has a strong, powerful community.

Think about your moments of great accomplishment here. Who was there to help make those moments possible, to push you, challenge you, to share them with you? Think now about your moments of great struggle here. Who was there to comfort you or cry with you, to just be with you?

It was your teachers, the staff members you know, your friends and classmates, your host family, and others. They were here, for the good and the great times, and also for the difficult moments.

This is what a community is. It builds us up, cheers us on, makes us better, reminds us that it will be okay, helps us find a way through. In the good and the great times, and in the difficult and terrible moments you found a community here—a resilient and vibrant community. Each of you drew strength from it, and each of you made it sturdier and better.

At Bowdoin, you have to work pretty hard to “bowl alone,” but in the world beyond campus, the phenomenon Putnam described continues apace. The idea of community, the value of community, is at risk in the world today. The more we allow it to erode, the less we achieve, we are diminished, we struggle, we are less happy.

But, it doesn't have to be this way, and you can make it so.

I want to share a story with you about a Bowdoin alumna, Iris Davis. Iris was a member of the class of 1978 and a trustee of the College. She passed away a year ago, far too young.

Iris came from Martha's Vineyard but not the Martha's Vineyard many of us probably think of. The island's African American community has a long and rich history, and she and

her family were part of that. Her parents were school teachers, and Iris came to Bowdoin at a time when women were just beginning to arrive in numbers and when there were few black students here. While just over five-foot-three, Iris was a gifted athlete—on the field hockey and women’s basketball teams, and on our track. As a senior and co-captain, she was described as the “spark plug” of the basketball team and its top defensive player. As field hockey goaltender, she led the state, allowing only seven goals in eleven games.

But Iris was much more than an outstanding athlete at Bowdoin. She was also a scholar and a leader on campus. A history major, Iris was an active member of the Afro-American Society who also found significant time to volunteer at the Brunswick Recreational Center and mentored a huge number of Brunswick kids. After graduation, her passionate concern for the public good guided her career. After earning a master of public health degree with a concentration in environmental science and epidemiology at Boston University in 1984, she joined the Department of Environmental Quality Engineering for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as an environmental scientist, a position that put her in the field and on the front lines of protecting public health and industry workers from contaminants in air, water, and soil.

She was in charge of compliance for environmental clean-ups on the famous, or infamous, “Big Dig” in Boston, a massive undertaking that, because of its sheer size and scope, presented a full spectrum of potential public health issues. She

also monitored the capping of Spectacle Island in Boston Harbor, the site of what was once the Boston city dump. In 1990, Iris was the Massachusetts state project manager for the Environmental Protection Agency's residential lead removal project. While her considerable scientific and interpersonal skill and years of experience might have led to a position in the private sector, Iris felt that she could do the greatest good for the largest number of people as a public servant and as an agent of change.

Iris did serious work, but never took herself too seriously. Before grad school she went back to the Vineyard and worked for the Board of Health as the sanitarian for the towns of Vineyard Haven, Edgartown, and Chilmark. It was reported that she, *"handled everything from restaurant inspections and septic system approval to costal water management and wetlands. One assignment involved a dispute between a pig farmer and his neighbor. The neighbor complained about the odor of the pigs. Iris's assessment: pigs are pigs, and they smell."*

Throughout these years, Iris stayed close to Bowdoin, volunteering for admissions, serving as president of the Alumni Council, and working to advance diversity and inclusion at the College. As a trustee, Iris was deeply engaged in considering Bowdoin's future. She asked insightful questions, provided wise counsel, and approached the work with realism, warmth, and a sense of fairness.

I attended her memorial service last fall on the Vineyard. Iris never married and left behind a sister and her mother. As the hour approached for the start of the service, the room filled. Then speaker after speaker rose to talk about this remarkable woman—from her life growing up on the Vineyard, her Bowdoin years, her work in environmental protection, her coaching and mentoring, her many, many friends. It was something to behold. The tears flowed.

Iris was not rich or famous. She seemed to shun the spotlight. But she had an immense impact on those who came to know her. And it was so clear to me sitting in that room on a warm sunny fall day the impact that she had—she built community everywhere she went. She was a source of strength, bringing others together, usually for great fun or something positive, but sometimes for support in the darkest moments.

Iris never let anyone bowl alone.

I share this with you because you should know just a little about Iris. She devoted her life to improving the lives of others through her leadership and commitment to public health, her service to Bowdoin, and maybe most importantly, in the way she built community. She was something special because of this.

As you begin your journey beyond Bowdoin, think about everything that you have gotten from the communities here that supported you. Take those experiences, think about

people like Iris, and spend time building your own communities wherever life takes you. They will make life more joyful, richer and meaningful for you and for all those you touch.

You can make it so.

Thank you.