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Communication Department Honors Ceremony 2022
Keynote Speech: "Adaptation through Communication:
Setting the Foundation at Fredonia"

Hi everyone, thank you so much for having me today, and thank you to Dr. McGowan-Kirsch for coordinating this event. I want to first congratulate you all on your accomplishments and achievements as part of the Department of Communication.

I remember so vividly sitting in your seats at this same event, about 5 and 6 years ago. It feels both like a lifetime ago and like it was just yesterday. There's something about Fredonia that always feels like home, and so I am honored to be back here today to speak with you all.

I have to admit, though, that when Dr. McGowan-Kirsch reached out to me to speak at this event, that notorious "imposter syndrome" hit, and I struggled to think about what life-changing and grand words of wisdom I could share today.

But as I struggled, I happened to come across this essay, titled *The Opposite of Loneliness*, written by Marina Keegan. Marina was a writer and a student at Yale. Just days after graduating, she tragically passed in a car accident, and her essays and stories were compiled and published into a best-selling book.

In *The Opposite of Loneliness*, she writes of her life as an undergrad, that time where we're all in this little bubble, and so much of the outside world seems uncertain and intimidating and unattainable.

She wrote, "Some of us have focused ourselves. Some of us know exactly what we want and are on the path to get it ...

For most of us, however, we're somewhat lost in this sea of liberal arts. Not quite sure what road we're on and whether we should have taken it. If only I had majored in biology...if only I'd gotten involved in journalism as a freshman...if only I'd thought to apply for this or for that..."

Something about those lines really put me right back here, feeling those same feelings I had 5 and 6 years ago. I really had no idea what I wanted to pursue with my Communication degrees. Not a clue. And I certainly had no plans to be where I am – a third-year law student about to graduate and take the Bar exam.

But what I can confidently tell you now is that the opportunities you have are nearly endless. You know, when we simplify it, communication, regardless of which

major you study, is about finding your audience, and telling a story, or making an argument. It's sharing that information in a way that is persuasive and digestible and compelling.

That skill is universal. Communication, in every sense, is a means of adaptation.

I can explain. So, after I graduated from Fredonia in 2017, I was browsing job postings, but nothing really sparked my interest. I didn't want to work an office job yet – or maybe ever. And seemingly out of the blue, I found this posting about an opening at a national monument in rural Utah. The National Parks Service was looking for someone to provide “interpretation services” to park guests. I didn't really know what “interpretation” meant, but took a chance by applying. Within the next couple of days, I accepted a position as an interpretation intern where I was paid to live and work at Natural Bridges National Monument and began planning my road-trip across the country.

When I got there, I quickly learned that my role would be to engage guests through guided hikes and tours, and essentially just talk to guests about the park – all of its flora and fauna, the history of the park, and the culture of the Ancestral Puebloans who lived there around 1300 A.D. And I had to make them care. Care enough to not step off trail and crush the cryptobiotic soil that takes about 5,000 years to develop and is vital to the ecosystem. Care enough to not disturb any of the remnants of the Ancestral Puebloans left behind from thousands of years ago. Care enough to come back and continue supporting the National Parks System.

I didn't have a background in environmental science or history or anthropology, but I was able to use the communication skills I developed at Fredonia to tell those stories.

After I got back from Utah, I was hired as a Content Marketing Associate at Evergreen Health and later promoted to copywriter. If you aren't familiar, Evergreen Health is a not-for-profit healthcare center that provides medical, behavioral, sexual health and supportive services to underserved and stigmatized communities. There, I was given the opportunity to talk to so many folks, some like me and some who had completely different experiences than me. I spoke with people living with HIV who lost friends during the AIDS crisis, trans folks who struggle to find employment and receive adequate healthcare, and drug users who, while seeking medical treatment, live in fear of law enforcement. And I was able to tell those stories .. Tell them in a way to reach out to our target audience so that they could be enrolled in affordable and accessible care, and tell them in a way that conveyed a non-traditional healthcare model and represented the organization's goals.

Again, so much of my capacity to do this was based in my education in communication – and had nothing to do with whether I knew the ins-and-outs of healthcare. It came down to my ability to identify an audience and make a persuasive argument to it.

But I later decided that I wanted to be more directly involved in impacting change. That's when I decided to apply to law school. Now, as part of my education, I've been a student attorney who represents domestic violence survivors in local family courts and in supreme court for more than a year. And here too, I make an argument -- to opposing counsel, to the judge -- that my client experienced the abuse she says she did, that she is the more fit parent, and that the offender should face consequences.

I love what I do right now, but I realize that I may always be a bit of a floater, in this sea of liberal arts. I don't feel lost, though, and you don't have to be either. Because my Communication degrees have translated seamlessly in every field I've been in.

BUT I know that, at this point in your life, it can still feel scary – where do I go from here? How do I start? The simplest answer is to start with what you know: communicate. Communicate with everyone around you. Use that to get involved in all of the unique opportunities that communication students have here.

Because I can tell you --

It was my Communication professors, Dr. McGowan-Kirsch and now-retired Professor Schwalbe, who wrote my letters of recommendations to law school. It was my honed-in writing and editing skills that I developed as assistant copy-editor and then copy-editor of the *The Leader* that helped me write a powerful legal brief. It was the portfolio of work I created as a member of the school's new media team with Fredonia's office of communication that helped me land those first couple of jobs. I even began a freelance business my senior year, providing copywriting, copyediting and content creation, so that I could be paid to assist with a Fredonia staff member's side gig. And it was the skills that I developed in my public relations and media management classes that filled in the rest.

The connections that you make here don't just go away when you graduate. So start making them, and keep making them.

This brings me back to that essay I mentioned earlier, the opposite of loneliness. College – this space -- is the opposite of loneliness. Marina described it like this:

“It's not quite love and it's not quite community; it's just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. Who are on your team.”

The people at Fredonia – your professors and your peers – are on your team. Use that, because it will make all the difference.

So, if you're a bit of an introvert like me, and you haven't yet – Just start talking. Start talking with that professor whose class you enjoy or the professor who challenges you the most. Start talking with students outside the communication department whose major interests you. Start talking with the student you see on WNYF or hear on Fredonia Radio. Just start talking. Those conversations and connections will provide the groundwork for whatever winding and unexpected roads you may take.

Congratulations to all of you. I can't wait to see where you'll go from here.