

## University of Michigan Residential College

Commencement 2016: Closing Remarks

Kacy Vlietstra-Martin and Evan Martin

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Good afternoon. We knew we would have to the privilege of following your performances in all of their RC glory, and we are so glad to be here today to bear witness to your accomplishments and celebrate with you. We'd like to start by saying thank you to the University of Michigan Residential College community, the faculty, the staff, and the families here today and most of all, to the Residential College Class of 2016. While there is no need to convince you of the value of your education, we hoped to briefly share our love for the RC community and how the residential college shaped our journey and continues to inspire us.

We met in the RC twelve years ago (which seems hard to believe), when I locked myself out of the courtyard door and a goofy young man came to my rescue with his Mcard in hand. We knew that because this was the RC, we had a few things in common. We understood that at the very minimum, we shared a love of language, culture, and the arts, a commitment to social justice, and just enough weirdness to be interesting.

After we graduated four years later, we planned a trip to India and Nepal to test out whether we were right about each other. Thousands of miles, dozens of conversations with new people in far-off places, and several missed planes in the Middle East later, it turns out we were.

We moved to Chicago to teach in the public schools, and made our first real attempt at applying some of the ideas that we took from our time in the RC. From there, we pursued medicine and education policy, still consciously driven by the values we made our own during our time here. We suspect they are the same values that you will walk out of these doors with today.

To us, the RC was three things. It was exposure to mentors and courses that demanded consideration of different cultural, social, and economic perspectives. It was the creation and inhabiting of a space with friends where we together challenged the status quo and thought about revolutions, large and small, and most of all, it was ours, just as it is yours, and will continue to be yours long after you leave this campus.

The RC gives us the connection to a community of mentors and peers that demanded the consideration of different perspectives. Living in the physical vicinity to our classes and the ideas that came out of them gave us all a sense of collective identity. It made seeking and fierce curiosity inevitable and constant, and normalized the idea that we could be optimistic in the face of a deep and nuanced understanding of the inequities inherent in our economic and social systems. We instilled in each other the audacity to believe that another world is possible.

The RC gave us a space to challenge the status quo and think about revolutions, large and small. We thought about how our friendships, our communities, and our cities could be better. This dialogue took place in our newly developing words at the language lunch tables, over coffee after iconoclastic performances in the Keene theater, within the walls of our humanities and social science classes, and during late nights in the halls of Hinsdale and Prescott. We pushed each other to question our assumptions about the way the world works and should work. The creation and perpetuation of this culture was ours, just as it is yours—Rather than being imposed upon us by a paternalistic source of authority, it was an ongoing grassroots effort to challenge each other, to hold each other accountable for our ideas and inspire action.

Through this Socratic exchange of ideas, we created knowledge; we didn't blindly take in information. We earned it through demanding of each other the ability to listen and truly hear. In some cases, the ideas we encountered infuriated or emboldened us, but in those early language courses, we struggled with the grammar and words, to respond. I am sure all of you here, whether you speak Spanish, French, German, Japanese, Russian or Latin, know this frustration. And so, we learned to listen first, and to choose our words very carefully as a method of thoughtful response.

Finally, the RC was ours, just as it is yours. You belong here now and will continue to belong as you venture forth. Upon leaving, we sought other communities that shared the very best of what the RC showed us was possible. This meant actively participating in an ongoing cultural, social and economic revolution, and a commitment to the ideals and beliefs that we created collectively—a responsibility to the greater community and our fundamental conviction to learn about the need and pitch in wherever we can toward the goal of eliminating disparity and promoting equality.

Our fellow graduates are living out these values eight years later (and don't worry parents, we've all found gainful employment within that time). Among the RC folks we still call our closest friends is a public health worker who provides community education to combat obesity in Louisiana, a human rights lawyer who fights for refugee status for migrants from Syria, and a biology doctoral candidate, who works to preserve the still-unbleached coral reefs in Honolulu. They're feminist writers, audio producers, medical doctors, and political activists.

The commonalities that the two of us saw in each other before we'd even had our first conversation still exist when we meet other RC alums. The identity and drive and skills you developed here are visible to the outside world in job interviews and city council meetings, in fieldwork and artwork, boardrooms, exam rooms, and classrooms. What you've learned and who you've become here shines vibrantly in your passionate endeavors. Knowing that someone lived and learned in the Residential College means we know we can count on a love of language, culture, and the arts, a commitment to social justice, and just enough weirdness to be interesting.

There is more than enough space at the table for people who are ready to drive change forward as leaders in our communities. We, you, are those people. Here, you established the confidence to step up engage. Here, you developed the intellectual dexterity to become those who bring new ideas to old problems. Here, you became ready to lead, not out of ambition or greed, but out of a commitment to the shared belief that another world is possible.

To the class of 2016, this is a proud moment for you, your families, and for the greater RC community. Congratulations, and Welcome!