

Greetings. Welcome, everybody. I just wanted to say thank you and welcome to all current and past faculty, students, alumni, friends, family, and supporters. I am beyond excited to be here to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Feminist and Gender Studies Program. I want to extend my sincere and deep thanks to Heidi, who somehow, I really don't know how, tracked me down, and after a pretty awesome conversation, offered me the opportunity to come back here to CC, where so much of who I am today, the skills that I espouse both personally and professionally were nurtured, grew, and really took fold.

Just a fair warning, the events and things I'm going to talk about are not in sequential order and for totally good reason. I firmly believe that my life, your life, is not so neat and clean. Rather, life can be messy and confusing at times, and take you down a secluded path. My experience here at CC in what was, at the time, the Women's Studies Program, provided me with the tools and foundations to deal with conflict, the ability to navigate and even initiate situations completely outside of my comfort zone, and sometimes even be successful in that. Being here brings me full circle, because right here, right now, I am totally nervous and totally outside of my comfort zone.

When I say successful at any point during this talk, I mean it as a relative term. Successes can be as small as finding that supporting evidence to bolster your argument or to successfully negotiate a contract for better wages or working conditions. Success can be winning an election for a school board in town as a first-time candidate or, believe it or not, success can be getting your child to brush their teeth, with or without toothpaste, without a fight. Believe me, some of you don't know that yet, but it really is and can be a fight and it's a success when it's not. My point is to keep it all in perspective and try to be you, the best you, utilizing your kindness, your individuality, your humanness, your powerful brain, and analytical minds, thinking outside the box every day. You won't always be successful at this, and I sure am not, but each day when you wake up, you have something of a clean slate, a new chance to start over again.

Let's set the scene. I was a junior in high school in New Jersey taking Honors U.S. History II. I had this unbelievably phenomenal teacher. He was short and fiery, passionate about social justice, women's rights, and civil rights. He initiated debates, discussions, and projects that challenged our growing minds, not only to learn about the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement, but to take his monumental moments in history and to apply them to our current lives. I can remember jumping out of my seat, waving my hand eagerly, my face flaming red with passion unable to keep my mouth shut, because I felt so strongly, so committed, and so in awe of some of these great women and men who put their lives on the line and spoke up so that others could have more access and ability to use their voice. It was at this point in high school where engagement involvement really was boring for me and the true keystone of it all was that teacher. He was a mentor, a guide, and he helped me not only to be engaged, but fostered and promoted controversial dialogue in a public school classroom. He taught us not to be afraid of conflict and difference, rather to listen, which is no easy task, even now, but especially when you're a nasty teenager feeling passionately about something, to hear someone else out and figure out a way to have a meaningful discussion.

For me, with that passion and idealism protruding out of my very being, so began my journey to Colorado College. I was a very different kind of kid who needed a really unique college with unparalleled academics in a truly remarkable setting, and that's what we have here. I lied to my parents that I had visited CC. I convinced them that it was a perfect fit. I moved over 2,000 miles away from home without actually knowing much about the school.

After dabbling in Geology and History, I found myself in Introduction to Women's Studies. Once again, I found myself getting that red in the face feeling, writing papers where you could see the flames of passion erupting from my pen. We were still using pens. It was 1999, not that long ago. I felt this about this thing that was so much bigger than just a social issue. It crossed socioeconomic constructs, and it was something that affected me and you, and you, and you, and you. It affected all of us. It topical and personal and political and controversial, and forced every single one of us to delve deeply into ourselves and into our preconceived notions while also addressing and challenging social expectations. It was who I was in every sense, and in my mind, affected every aspect of my being and all of beings in the world around me.

What ultimately kept me in the major, and I bet this is true for a lot of you, were the professors and the level of engagement that they could evoke from students. There were many so different kinds of students from diverse backgrounds in the program, and every single person was compelled to engage. I honestly don't know how they did it, but the best professors had this way of challenging you about the way that you thought about things, took you outside of your comfort zone, incited as well as quelled conflict, and made you hone your verbal and written skills to effectively communicate and support your arguments and positions. For me, ecofeminism, race, class, and gender, feminism and philosophy, and, believe it or not, research methods were my favorite and some of my most challenging classes. Each of these classes involved sharing meals and breaking bread over heated discussions with classmates and professors. There is something so unique and familiar about the experience of sharing food that transforms learning into so much more than just being in class. That is so much of how the experience of being a student in this program shapes you as a person and as a professional.

Research methods, I had it with Margie Duncombe. I think there were five or six of us in the class. I think it was three guys and two or three women. It was a truly unique experience. I honestly don't remember a ton of stuff that I learned. I remember something about qualitative and quantitative research, and there were studies and ethical review boards and standards. What I really gained and what has carried into all aspects of my career and my personal life, and I think what everyone gained from that class, was the ability to interact in a meaningful and candid way. Thinking and exploring critically with others who were so insanely different from each other. Each person in that class had a completely different background and brought a totally different perspective, but yet each person was willing to step outside of their comfort zone to listen to each other and engage in fiery and sometimes extremely contentious debate, and then come back the next day, each of us assuming our positions on, at that time it was whatever couch or chair was available, and do it all over again. Don't get me wrong. We had some really dense material and had many discussions of significant substance. The biggest take away

for me, after all of these years, was don't be afraid to step outside of that comfort zone and engage with someone who is not like you, experience the conflict, and do research to bolster your position and your argument, but most importantly, you need to listen.

One of the beauties of law school—I'm a lawyer—one of the beauties of law school if anyone is thinking about it, is that you get to dabble in so many different areas of the law. You don't really specialize in law in school. You are thrown into these enormous lecture halls with 100 or 200 students. It's really actually pretty amazing. As a CC kid, it was a really big change to go from the black plan to a semester with the most voluminous, and usually dry reading and intense writing. The cool and really unique thing is that there are older adults, kids right out of college, people from every country, every background, every skin color, and religion, every sexual orientation, every gender identity. You name it, they were there in that classroom. You very quickly realize you're pretty much all on the same playing field in that classroom. It's really pretty humbling. Then, it's up to you to show that first smile to somebody, to step outside of your regular, your comfort zone, to open the door to new friends, new networks, and new ideas using the tools that are nurtured and developed here at CC in this program.

Academically at law school, the challenge is real. I spent many, many nights late in the library studying and outlining and reading and studying and outlining and reading. It just never ended. It was a very different way from the way that I learned here in the Women's Studies Program at CC. It added a new dimension to my analytical framework and ability to feel, see, and deal with conflicting problems. I was not a perfect student by any stretch of the imagination, but through practice, commitment, and working with the many friends and classmates, we were all able to succeed together in our own ways.

A really cool thing also about law school is that as a law student, you can go to court and represent certain clients in various proceedings under the supervision of a licensed attorney. In my second year of law school, I worked for this amazing nonprofit, which Heidi had referenced, which did immigration work. I wrote voluminous briefs and submissions fighting to get detained immigrant women and men who were awaiting removal in prison, some kind of relief so that they can stay in the country. I went into prison often and interviewed many detainees. Sometimes, it felt downright hopeless and that the system was stacked against so many who had so few resources. I was completely taken out of my comfort zone, but through the confidence in ever-growing abilities, I went to court and put on a whole case arguing that this young man from Sierra Leone should not be deported to the persecution that he faced in his home country. I was 24, and I had to put on evidence and prove to an immigration judge that this man who had a life here in the U.S. should not be sent back to a country that he had left when he was a baby, whose father have been killed due to his political beliefs. I was scared shitless. I mean, for real. Who in their right mind would put this man's life and future in my hands? I won, and he got to stay here with his family and continue the life that he had built. That was true vindication for what can happen when you put yourself in a situation that you're not comfortable in or where you put all of the tools that you have gathered over time, critical thinking, hard work, commitment, effective and creative writing to the test. It definitely did not always work out this way, but with loss and failure, there's some

more compelling drive to get better and to succeed in facing the conflict, to do more research, put in the time, and to listen. Just those lessons in and of themselves are a small success.

I remember one time as I was finishing up my third year in law school, right before graduating, getting my master's degree and my JD, talking to my dad, who is this incredibly successful businessman and insanely intelligent and revered labor attorney, about the direction that my legal career was going. I was getting my resume ready and, of course, I had Women's Studies as my major on there. I'll never forget it. He said, "Listen, Brady. Don't put Women's Studies major on your resume. You don't want them to think that you're one of those crazy feminists." As you can imagine at the time, that really pissed me off. I want you to step back, because my dad is my mentor and one of the people that in this world I look up to the most. He certainly contributed to the inquisitive mind that I have. I know that when he said this, he was looking at it through his lens, through his perspective, and trying to put me in the best possible spot that he thought for me career-wise. He loves me and was truly saying it out of the place of love. As I'm sure you can all guess, I did not take this advice. Such advice was not in my nature, probably in part because I was truly so proud of the many tools and experiences that I gained through my experience here in the Women's Studies [Program]. I'm sure many of you have heard or experienced various incarnations of this kind of thing before.

Let me tell you, it was not easy for me to confront this very real reality that that kind of teaching and judgment does exist in our world, even today when there have been significant strides for women, women of color, people of color, gender and non-conforming people, transmen, transwomen, people who are disabled or differently abled, or really anyone who doesn't fit the inside much of mainstream societies picture of what someone should be or should look like. For me, it was important, it was critical that anyone who was going to hire me be aware that I could and did think outside the box, think critically and engage with both people, clients, and adversaries of all kinds in a constructive and effective manner all the while acknowledging and respecting each person's inherent individual worth. That was what being a CC Women's Studies major meant. I told my dad, "Thanks for your constructive criticism," and then I left my major on that resume. I couldn't be more proud. It took me down this path, and it led me right here where I am today. I tell you my mom can definitely confirm this; my dad is really pretty proud of where my degree got me.

If you'd read my bio or if you listened to what Heidi said before, you guys will know this, but if you weren't listening or if you didn't read it, I'm a labor lawyer. Part of what I do, one of my specialties is representing union health and welfare funds as well as pension funds which are paper technical. It requires hours of mulling over complex, obtusely-worded statutes, and even more crazy case while interpreting those statutes. It involves hours and hours of writing briefs and trial and motions and making arguments to federal court judges. It probably sounds pretty boring, and sometimes it is, but the writing, the creativity, and analysis that goes into crafting an argument, taking law, a bunch of words that are written on a piece of paper, and all of these cases and trying to interpret that law and applying them to the facts in your case, it takes the very critical thinking and writing that you learn right here in this program from these professors that I learned in this program. You're applying them

to convince a judge that you're right. The bonus, if you win and you do convince that judge or arbitrator, for me, the bonus is that working women and men who need benefits, who need them the most are protected and enriched and their lives are made better.

The other specialty in my practice, the one that I think is more inextricably linked to my time here at CC as a Women's Studies major, is representing labor unions. I did my senior project on a related topic about women in the workplace. There were quite a few professors here who helped to steer me in that direction and guide my passion for contributing towards bettering women in the workplace, opening doors, and putting women on a more equal footing when it came to pay and access to jobs and promotional opportunities. Given the fact that labor was in my blood through my dad's practice and my path at CC, it was pretty natural for me to hone in on this when I went to law school. In my third year, I took a number of labor law classes. Coming out of law school and post-clerkship with one of the most ethical fantastic legal minds and mentors on the New Jersey Superior Court, for me, the New Jersey Attorney General's Office was the only place that I wanted to work, and so there I went. I was the first one to buck authority, especially at the ills of government and politicians who really knew nothing and didn't really care about [what] working women and families truly needed. But where I worked at the [Attorney General's] office, it was the feet on the ground, the deputy attorneys general like myself—that was where the action was.

I will tell you right now, if you want to experience and you want to get good at what you're doing, go work for a public agency or a nonprofit. You are thrown in with some supervision, pretty subpar pay that can hardly cover student loans, and an absolutely insane caseload. You know what? You do it, and you get really good. You become an absolutely phenomenal advocate really fast. When I was at the AG's office, I had to figure out how to seek out people with knowledge, to ask both the right questions and the wrong questions, to engage in debates and come up with some well-supported answers. I had to manage my time and think critically, write clearly and succinctly so that I could protect the integrity of the taxpayer who funds all of the various state agencies, and prevent waste. I've refined my skills. These challenges and these skills that you are all learning and building that, for me, started in these classrooms on this campus. They get better with time and effort and practice and commitment. It was up for me just as it's up to every single one of you, regardless of the stage in your life or education or in your career that you are in to put in the effort to make the commitment and to open up the doors to whatever's next.

I got a little bit off-track, but I was talking about labor unions and that's what I do. I represent unions that are mainly made up of blue-collar women and men who are truck drivers, New Jersey Transit bus operators, cleaners, mechanics, electrical workers, tree trimmers, roofers, garbage collectors, people who work in the department of public works. We represent firefighters, police officers. These are women and men who work seriously hard and often have employers who don't want to pay them or give them raises. They don't want to give them adequate health insurance, because it's too expensive. They often impose discipline when it is truly unjustified. These women and men have little, if any, voice. It's my job and my

passion to give them a voice, let them tell their story, and put them on as an equal a playing field as possible.

I want to step away from the technical aspects of the impact of my experience here at CC and the Women's Studies [Program] and impart upon all of you one of the major lessons that has emerged from being a women's studies major. It really transcends just the personal or the career aspects. It really reaches into every single little corner of humaneness of your very being. I'm curious and I really want to put you on the spot. If I was walking past you somewhere on campus, would you make eye contact with me? Would you say good morning? Would you say hi? Maybe some of you would, but maybe some of you wouldn't. I would. I would look at you, make eye contact, and smile, and say hi. I'm going to tell you why. One of the most important things that I gained out of my working with the community and this [program], with being in intimate classes with so many truly diverse brilliant thinking minds, was that if I wanted to make my community and the greater community a better place, I needed to go out on a limb, step out of my comfort zone, and interact with people who were different from me. I needed to make eye contact with the person in the back of the room or strike up a conversation with the person filling up their cup of water while walking across the quad. Go sit down next to somebody who you don't know and simply smile and say "hi." It is not easy. It definitely takes you and that person outside of their normal activity, outside of their comfort zone. It is straight-up awkward. Sometimes it really doesn't work out so well, but sometimes it does. At its worst, there is one extra smile in the world today. At its best, you foster a new friend often open a new door that will take you down a new path that you didn't know existed before. Taking those kinds of chances on people, engaging with others, opening those kinds of doors is what this program instills in all of us. That's what this program is all about. That skill, and it really is a skill that needs practice, makes you better able to talk and communicate with people in all aspects of your future career. For me, it contributes to working with hardworking clients so that I can in turn clearly and succinctly and persuasively convey their voice to a decision maker.

As Heidi mentioned, I have three young sons. I have a five-year-old who just started kindergarten, a seven-year-old in second grade and an 11-year-old in middle school sixth grade. On the first day of school this year, I gave them each a homework assignment: meet somebody in your class and come home and tell me their name. At the end of the day around the dinner table, in turn, each child told me the name of their new friends. When it was my seven-year-old's turn, and he's a difficult one, he told me that he met and talked to a girl, Sophia. She was new to the school. I told him that I was proud of him. His response was, "Yes, but mom, I don't really think I'm going to be friends with her. I don't really know if I like her." I smiled inside, because he really did it. He went outside of his comfort zone, that little seven-year-old comfort zone, by meeting this new girl. It didn't work out for them to be friends yet. It's only October. That's okay. That's okay, too. He took that first step.

I can't tell you that your studies in this program are going to make you a successful doctor or lawyer or organizer or advocate or activist, or really that you're going to be successful down any particular career path. What I can tell you and what I want to leave you with is that if you are willing and able to commit yourself and work hard, learn how to write and effectively communicate your thoughts and beliefs, both on paper and orally, to truly take advantage of every interaction with all of your

professors here in the Feminist and Gender Studies Program, to truly listen to your classmates and professors even, and more importantly, when you don't agree, you will be equipped with the tools that you need to take you down a path and open doors that you never knew existed. It will enable you to create networks of which you can avail yourself professionally or personally in times of joy and in times of pain. These are the values, ideals, and skills that this program stands for and endeavor to teach us when I was here. I know that this and so much more is what this program stands for now. This program, the professors, classmates, and connections that I made here have opened up so many doors for me. Sometimes that door took me down a meandering path. Sometimes the door led me walking assuredly down a powerful path. All the while, regardless of the door which was opened, it was while utilizing a uniquely Colorado College Feminist and Gender Studies model of critical thinking of analyzing problems and making sound arguments supported by facts and evidence and to know and believe that every individual has inherent worth. All of these things that I took away from my time here have brought me this far. I challenge all of you to continue this tradition, to be a true thinking person who fully engages with others in both your professional life and your personal life.

I look forward to speaking with any and all of you because this conversation has only just begun. Let's continue our engagement together and continue to learn from one another. Thank you so much for inviting me and having me here for this remarkable celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Feminist and Gender Studies Program. I am truly humbled and grateful for this experience.

Thank you.