**UNIVERSITY OF MAINE COMMENCEMENT SPEECH: MAY 2019**

**Dr. Sandra Caron, 2019 Distinguished Maine Professor**

I am so honored to speak to you today as not just a faculty member, but a graduate of the University of Maine. Forty years ago, I was sitting where you are now, a member of the Class of 1979 -- the first graduating class, in fact, to hold its ceremony in Alfond Arena.

Shortly before I graduated, I was meeting with my advisor, Dr. Lloyd Brightman, my role model and mentor. In that meeting, he asked me to stay on at UMaine for my Master’s degree and to work with him before he retired, which he expected to be in another 10 years. He also encouraged me to pursue my Ph.D., get work experience away from Maine, and then maybe come back here to interview for a faculty position. That meeting changed my life. His suggestion gave me a clear — albeit ambitious — plan for returning to the place that was home, to do the research and teaching I loved.

I followed Dr. Brightman’s advice. I pursued my Ph.D. at Syracuse University and took a job at Cornell before landing my dream job here at UMaine in 1988. Then I was the professor meeting with students in my office. And one of those students was Neal, who came out to me during our meeting. He said I was the first person he came out to because of something that happened earlier that semester: I had been eating dinner with him and other undergraduates in a dining hall near Hancock Hall, where I was a faculty-in-residence. Someone at our table made a homophobic joke, and my response was to say that it wasn’t funny. The laughter died and the conversation moved to other topics. Neal told me that it was at that moment he decided he could trust me as an advocate for gay students.

But here’s the thing. When Neal told me about the incident in the dining hall, I had no recollection of the experience. It was a passing moment to me, an automatic response that was even more poignant then, at the height of the AIDS crisis. Truth be told, I doubt Dr. Brightman remembers that life-changing advice he gave me in his office. He was just doing what faculty members do -- encouraging a student to follow her dreams, and helping her find a path for them.

The days we live rush by, filled with mundane moments and routines. It’s easy to forget what power we have to change the lives of others, and the influence those we admire have on us. What those people say to us, one on one, how we observe them live their lives, can make all the difference in nurturing our talents and passions, and empowering us to follow our dreams.

If you think about it, it probably won’t take you long to remember the moment when someone you admire -- a faculty member, a parent, a friend -- helped you believe in yourself and kept you on the path to earning your degree when you were most discouraged, and you didn’t see a way forward. And, yet, they probably don’t even remember that moment, because they were just living their lives and trying to be a good friend to you.

And you’ve done the same for others. YOU have said and done things that have helped others find their way to a seat in this room, ready to pick up their degree and take on the world. YOU likely don’t remember most of those moments, but they do. And this will be true your entire life. At any given moment, someone is looking up to you, following your example, and taking your words to heart. Every day, you have the power to lift that person up. The value of our lives doesn’t come from our degrees, the money we earn, or the size of our house. It comes from using the influence we have for good, in lifting others up so that they can do the same.

I love this quote from the Talmud: "If you can save one person, it's as though you've saved the world." One person. One at a time.

If there was one phrase to sum up my life’s work in studying human sexuality and family relationships, it would be “It’s personal.” I’ve spent over 30 years surveying thousands of college students, exploring changing beliefs. I’ve been able to pour over a mountain of data and see real change, positive change, in attitudes about marriage equality and openness about sexual orientation, gender expression and identity that didn’t exist when I began my work decades ago. Students like Neal have a much easier time today because one by one, person by person, you’ve chosen to accept your classmates, friends, and family members for who they are, and respect who they love.

It’s personal. It’s all about those moments of standing up, reaching out, and helping those around you believe in themselves when they are most discouraged and can’t see a way forward. I hope you’ll find time today to thank those faculty members, your own Dr. Brightmans, who helped get you here. I hope you’ll take a moment to remind your parents, other family members, and friends of those times they lifted you up just by their love and offhand remarks.

And let me take this moment to thank you. I’m grateful every day for the joy of spending my time with students filled with energy and passion for learning. I never thought on my graduation day 40 years ago that it would be the first of many annual trips to the Alfond for commencement activities. It’s an honor to welcome you as fellow UMaine alumni.