NURSING SCHOOL GRADUATION

SPEECH FOR

KIM LEFTWICH

Hello everyone and welcome to this year’s graduation of Odessa College School of Nursing. This class is very special to me, as this is the “penultimate” group of graduates that I will have the privilege of teaching before I go on to complete my doctorate in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. It’s ironic that as you all are completing your studies, I will be recommitting to mine, but there’s one thing every one of us must always keep in mind, and that is that life is our school and we are all here to learn throughout our lives. Our education never stops and it is up to each one of us to keep our eyes, ears and minds open to new ideas and new possibilities. To all of the family and friends with us today, we’re thrilled that you are here to join us in this celebration and, I am sure the graduates are thankful to each one of you for many reasons, especially your moral support and encouragement. Nursing school can be challenging, but knowing that friends and family are there for the good times as well as the more challenging times is a real gift. To the faculty, you’ve done a fine job in teaching and mentoring our graduates, and to all of our nurses present today, **(if you want to make a joke, you can say)** Let’s give all of the tough stuff to the newbie’s … (only kidding!) (**If you want to go a little “easier,” you can say**) I am sure each one of us sees a little bit of ourselves reflected in the eager faces of our graduates. It’s great for us to have a reminder of the reason why we chose the nursing profession, and being in this room w/this year’s crop of new nurses is really exhilarating.

At this time of year, we know that in honor of Florence Nightingale’s birth, we celebrate National Nurse’s Week. Of course our graduates have worked super hard to achieve this milestone in their lives and careers…let’s just hope that with having to endure all of those finals and tests, this is not more like “Nurses **WEAK**.” (**Wait for the laugh**) Excuse me for that little-very little pun, because I know each one of you is made from strong and resilient stock. It takes a special kind of person to be a nurse, and I am proud to have all of you join our “team.” Florence Nightingale led the way as she practically created this profession and although she had her flaws and she certainly wasn’t born into a working class family, her vision, compassion and tenacity set the bar for all of us who follow in her footsteps. Sometimes nurses are referred to as ‘angels in comfortable shoes.” Well… I can tell you, and I am sure some of our more tenured colleagues can agree, that although the shoes may not always be that comfortable, to your patients who need you, you truly are **angels**.

This year’s theme for National Nurses Week is “Nurses: Advocating, Leading, Caring.” Well, there’s your job description summed up into three succinct words. Of course, we also have to add, multi-tasking, tireless, enthusiastic, strong and resourceful if we really even want to approach the qualities essentially present in a nurse. We should also add intuitive and patient as well. We have to be able to interpret signs and symptoms, read charts, and decipher “hieroglyphics.” What do I mean by that? Let me give you a little example. I heard that doctors at a hospital in Brooklyn, New York had gone on strike. The word on the street was that hospital officials said they would find out what the Doctors' demands were as soon as they were able to locate a nurse who could find the time to get to the protest to **read the picket signs**! (**Wait for the laugh**). But really, although we kid about these sorts of things, there are 2 things we do know about our profession-nurses serve an essential roll in all aspects of medical care and administration, and (2) doctors really **DO** have exotic penmanship!

Although we all benefit from the conveniences of modern technology designed to make our jobs easier and patients recover at unprecedented speed, every generation that enters the nursing profession, in order to be effective and successful in their careers, must be willing to adapt to the challenges and opportunities presented by contemporary conditions. But keep in mind that the basic qualities that make us effective nurses don’t change. That’s where advocacy, leadership and caring come in. Without these three vital qualities, where would the nursing profession be?

Although thanks to modern discoveries and technology, there has been a critical shift in healthcare focus over the past few generations-a shift that has gone from dealing with the illness to working on discovery, prevention and maintenance of health for everyone, as nurses, we have the opportunity and challenge of dealing with patients at probably the most vulnerable times in their lives. We must be there to **advocate** for them at every phase of their involvement with the health care system, walking a fine line as we pay attention to the minutest details of each case, all the while anticipating the end result. Many times it is the nurse who will exercise his or her intuition in order to benefit the patient. It doesn’t matter where your nursing career takes you. Whether you find yourself as a nurse in a clinic or elementary school, or in a world-class hospital dealing with patients having endured excessive trauma or in a neo-natal intensive care unit, it will be your ability to advocate for each patient in each unique situation that will distinguish you.

You will also eventually find yourselves leading. No matter what your area of focus or job description you have in the nursing profession, you must approach the job responsibly and with an “entrepreneurial” sense of leadership. Your patients and medical staff depend on you for guidance and it is the nurse who often has the most direct and frequent contact with the patient. Of course at the beginning of your career, you may not be asked to lead a team, but the mandate of the nurse is to be prepared to do so if necessary.

And what would a nurse be without the caring, compassion and concern he or she brings to each patient and case? Here’s what the Dalai Lama has to say about this very human and humane topic. He said, “Compassion is not religious business. It’s human business, it is not luxury, it is essential for our own peace of mind and mental stability, it is essential for human survival.” Compassion will save a life-especially your own, and although sometimes our jobs expose us to things no one should have to witness, the patient is going through a far more trying episode in his or her life. It is the calling of the nurse to never lose sight of the compassion required to soothe the human soul.

As you all go forth to take your place in the offices and hospitals and clinics where you practice, remember the words of Florence Nightingale, once again, the person credited with discovering and developing modern nursing. This is how she described our profession. If you’ve heard it before, then listen again. Listen with new ears and new respect as you are now full-fledged nurses: “Nursing is an **art**: and if it is to be made an art, it requires an exclusive devotion as hard a preparation, as any painter's or sculptor's work; for what is the having to do with dead canvas or dead marble, compared with having to do with the living body, the temple of God's spirit? It is one of the Fine Arts: I had almost said, the finest of Fine Arts.” All of you are artists and your patients are the medium through which you communicate. You make a tremendous difference in the lives, health and well being of all with whom you come into contact. Your community and health care system needs you and it is up to you to bring your art-your advocacy, your compassion, your knowledge and your gentle but reassuring touch to those who need it most. Remember to treat patients and colleagues as you would want to be treated. No one is ever too busy to practice empathy and compassion.

And finally, I want you to always remember to maintain a healthy sense of humor because, as we all know, laughter **is the best medicine**. So on that note, I will leave you with another little story. Although this didn’t actually happen to me, it could have-and it could happen to you too…

A patient was wheeling himself frantically down the hall of a hospital in his wheelchair, just before his operation. A nurse stopped him, because nurses are always at the ready, and asked, "What's the matter?"  In a panicked voice he said, " I was outside my operating room, about to go in, and I heard sobs, so I listened to see what was going on and I just heard my nurse say, 'It's a very simple operation, don't worry, I'm sure it will be all right.'"  "She was just trying to comfort you, what's so frightening about that?"  "She wasn't talking to me. She was talking to the doctor!" (**Wait for the laugh**)

On that note, congratulations to all of our graduates. May you always find endless patience for your patients, medical staff and colleagues, and may you always know that you have chosen a noble and vital profession. I wish you the best of luck and I would say, “Break a leg,” but then again, that would just give us more of a caseload! Congratulations!