**GRADUATION SPEECH**

**FOR**

**GWYNETH BERNIER**

Ms. Coffey, Mrs. Alvar, Ms. Bdeir, Distinguished Trustees, Faculty, Staff, Administration, and Honored Guests, welcome! On behalf of the Class of 2019, I thank you for your guidance and support during our journey. You have given us nothing short of everything.... which is a great education that encourages us to keep learning. (**Is it okay that I added to the first 2 sentences?**)

What was I most grateful for during my years at Marymount??? That’s easy... my parents’ emotional support, unwavering encouragement, and mostly their unconditional willingness... to fund my love of Starbucks. *(pause for laughter)* No, the thing I’m actually most grateful for is discovering the power of my voice. To explain that a little, Marymount taught me three fundamental lessons, the first of which is to speak loudly and with conviction. It’s one thing to have a message. It’s another to be able to communicate effectively.

Parents, each of your daughters, at some point or another, has had to stand where I am standing now ... and let me tell you—it’s nerve wracking. You know, the first time I stood here to read aloud the prayer for my First Communion, I couldn’t even see over the podium. But I pushed past the fear and suddenly, public speaking wasn’t so daunting anymore. (**Do you want to add**) Of course it helped that I was so little, I could barely see all those pairs of eyes waiting...watching...trying to hear my not yet fully resounding Marymount voice... (**and wait for the laugh**)

Since then, Marymount has given me countless opportunities to develop my authentic voice in a safe environment—one in which I was confident that people would listen. That’s not something you find too often outside of this school, especially as a woman.

My second takeaway is learning that if you speak your mind, people will listen. For my sixth-grade Nerdy Derby, everyone else designed four wheeled model race cars, but I asked, “What if I used three?” No one told me it was ridiculous; instead, I received unconditional validation and encouragement. As it turns out, that three-wheeled car was the fastest one on the track. In the real world, this instinct to intentionally challenge the status quo has the potential to translate into innovation—to new ideas...to social change.

The final and arguably the most important thing Marymount has taught me is that our voices **matter**. They are a gift, and with this gift comes the responsibility to use them to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves. When I think about using my voice to lift others up, the annual M-PACT philanthropy project comes to mind. During my sophomore year, Marymount gave me the opportunity to be a part of this advocacy competition that introduced us to the importance of social leadership. My classmates and I, fifteen years old at the time, fought for 65.3 million refugees and won a ten-thousand dollar grant to resettle eighteen families here in New York City. Our voices produced a positive change for others, and I know that in turn, the work we did will continue to impact those within the group we served, the surrounding community, and hopefully, to a much larger segment of the population.

We are living in a historically unprecedented time. The global rise of populism threatens the balance of the liberal world order and, domestically, the United States has never been more polarized. On the flip side, never before in history have women had the opportunities we can find now... to have **all** of our voices heard—to achieve greater presence in all levels of government, to share in and lead the conversation in Corporate America—and to make a real, substantial impact in all facets of life. Marymount has provided us with the foundation, inspiration, and intention to do just that—to dive in without fear, but with conviction and purpose, and to take risks in pursuit of a world that most can only imagine.

The future of this new world *is* uncertain. But if there is one thing I know to be true, it is that this mighty group of Marymount women I am proud to call my sisters **cannot** and **will not** be silent. This is **our** *time*. This is **our** *moment*. Our destiny is calling out to us. May we all use our voices for the advancement of integrity, truth, awareness, and social justice, and may all that we’ve learned here inspire us to lead our global community towards positive change!! Thank you all!