

“It All Gets Used”

Thank you, Dr. Reynolds, Dr. Doyle, and Dr. Arbery. I know what we are all really looking forward to is seeing these students be inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, enjoying lunch with our families, friends, and professors, and then hopefully going down to Haskell Avenue and getting a picture with the Leaning Tower of Dallas while we still can—just in case the demolition crews are actually successful in tearing it down after all. So, I will try my best to keep this brief. I want to start off with the most important thing, which is to say thank you and congratulations. To all of the families, friends, and professors who have taken time out of their Sunday afternoon to be here to celebrate this incredible group of students: thank you for all of the time, resources, and care that you have invested into the juniors and seniors that you see before you. Success is certainly not a solo enterprise, and to achieve all that these students have and will continue to requires the kind of unconditional support, guidance, and encouragement that you all provide. And to the students who are anxiously awaiting induction into this prestigious society: congratulations. At this point in the semester, you are likely juggling midterms, papers, independent research projects, and maybe even job applications. When you are being pulled in all of these different directions, it is hard enough to slow down and make sure that you get a good night’s rest or eat something other than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for the third meal in a row, much less find the time to step back, take a moment, reflect on and celebrate all that your hard work has achieved. That you are sitting here today and about to become a member of Phi Beta Kappa is a testament to your passion for knowledge and your commitment to striving for excellence in everything that you do. Each of you are outstanding examples of the power that good character, dedication, and passion can have when combined. So I hope that while we are all here together today that you take the time to reflect on everything that you have accomplished and really be proud of yourself.

Phi Beta Kappa’s motto is “love of learning is the guide of life”, and for us college students, what words could be more appropriate to describe our lives now? If you are in your third or fourth year of college and still waking up for your 8am every day, chances are that you love learning enough to constantly dedicate your time and energy to the pursuit of knowledge, and that you are hoping that the things you are studying now will guide you down the path of life you hope to travel. But, chances also are that if you are someone who *really* loves learning, you are not going to be satisfied with one or even two majors, and that often times you find yourself chasing your passion and curiosity into disciplines that may seem completely unrelated to whatever your primary field of study is. This is one of the most exciting parts of being a freshman or sophomore—being completely free to learn to your heart’s content. But then, a year, two years have passed, and you are suddenly a junior or a senior. In front of you is a blank page and the seemingly impossible challenge of having to condense the sum total of everything that you have ever done and learned into a few sentences or paragraphs—whether it’s in a personal statement, a cover letter, or an elevator pitch. You remember all of the classes that you took because they looked interesting and that you enjoyed because they were, but you are suddenly overwhelmed by a sinking feeling in your gut. It’s part uncertainty, anxiety, perhaps not too far off from buyer’s remorse. And you start to wonder if maybe you should have gone for another minor instead of the one you did, because how is musical theater going to help you

in medical school? If this sounds familiar to you, I can promise that you are in good company. So, today I want to tell you about the place where I learned to embrace and appreciate my eclectic education, and in doing so I hope to motivate why *your* diverse education and experiences are incredibly valuable and why you should not be afraid to let your love of learning be the guide of your life.

At the beginning of my sophomore year, I was a freshly-declared anthropology major who had only recently been convinced that archaeology was a profession that you could actually do for a living, and not just something that George Lucas created to make a movie so that we could see Harrison Ford use a whip and a statue to escape from a snake-infested temple. At that time, I still very much conceived of archaeology as strictly a field science, and rarely thought of what happened to artifacts once they are removed from the ground other than going into a museum...that is, until I started working as an undergraduate research assistant for SMU's Archaeology Research Collections (which I will refer to as the ARC from here on out).

The ARC cares for over 2,000 boxes of artifacts that tell hundreds of years' worth of stories about Texas history. We look after collections—which is the term we use to refer to groups of artifacts that are from a particular site or project—that come from all manner of time periods and regions across the state; some of my favorites include the Gaines-McGowan Collection, which came from a historic house continuously occupied from 1818 to the 1960s and was built by a man who signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, and the Wichita Project Collection, which contains some truly breathtaking prehistoric and proto-historic Native American artifacts. My point in telling you this is that each one of these collections is made up of a unique group of hundreds of different artifacts that tell the stories of a particular place, a particular time period, or particular people.

And as a research assistant in the ARC, I have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to closely engage with these artifacts, including getting to share these stories with others through building exhibits for both of the collections that I mentioned a few moments ago. Now, creating an exhibit is simultaneously one of the most thrilling and intimidating experiences. Once you have recovered from the initial excitement of having the chance to curate your own exhibit (because, honestly, that is every museum lover's dream), you get the keys and head into the collections space to get to work. Maybe it's not exactly like the sprawling warehouse at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but you are surrounded by hundreds of boxes of historic cannonballs and centuries old arrowheads, and there are not any stanchions or glass cases in the way of you literally holding history in your hands. So that's the thrilling part; but as for the intimidating part, in building an exhibit you take on the challenge of looking at the hundreds of artifacts in a collection and trying to tell a story with just a select few of them. This is particularly difficult, because if there is one thing to know about archaeology (and really anthropology as a whole) it is that *everything* is valuable. Items that might look like and may have literally been trash to people in the past can be the foundations for incredibly impactful research or can tell you amazing stories that you won't find in a history textbook. Eventually, though, weeks later and after you've finally managed to select your objects and tell

your story, in your mind that selection of artifacts sort of becomes the identity of that collection.

But what about the other hundreds of artifacts that didn't make it into your exhibit? What you see in any exhibit is just a small portion of what is in that collection, and all of the things that do not appear are no less important than those that do, and they *will* get used in other ways. In a year, an incoming student may choose to build their thesis or dissertation on other artifacts in the collection; the next person who has my job may build an exhibit for the same collection that uses an entirely different set of artifacts to tell a new story; or a volunteer who is inventorying or rehabilitating the collection might come across an artifact and through it have a moment where they connect with history in an intimate way. And I find that that is one of the most beautiful things about archaeology: that it *all* is important and it *all* gets used.

So, given that most of you are not archaeologists nor are you planning to be, how is any of what I just shared relevant to you? Well, when you think about it, we are all collections. We are collections of everything that we have done, everything that we have learned, everything that we love. And we are constantly building exhibits of ourselves to show the world and to tell different stories of our identities. But because there are hundreds upon thousands of things that make us who we are, we inevitably have to leave some things out of these stories. Consequently, sometimes we struggle to see the practical value of things that we love when we cannot find a place for them in these narratives. But I am a firm believer in the perspective that, just as with artifacts in a collection, everything that you do and learn and love—all of it gets used, whether it helps you enter an industry that you have never even considered but have the potential to do so much good in, or perhaps even just to make you a happier person and give you something fun to talk about with your friends over dinner. Maybe making you or your friends happy does not seem like the most noble endeavor, but I believe that you have the capacity to do the most good for the world when you are doing the most good for yourself and those close to you—so do not discount the impact that such things can have. I want to encourage everyone that no matter what your next steps are, keep learning and doing what you love. Even if the value of something is not obvious right now, it will all get used someday and in some way. So listen to your passion, let yourself follow it in the direction that it's guiding you, wherever it may lead. And today, please be so proud of and take the time to celebrate yourself. To get to where you are in your life right now is truly no small victory.

Once again, thank you all for being here, and congratulations to our inductees!