

Good evening fellow graduates, faculty, family, and friends. Thankyou for being here to celebrate The Stony Brook University School of Social Welfare Class of 2023. My name is John, and I'd like to share a few words with you this evening.

This past semester, on Tuesday nights, I took a policy class with Professor Etká Kholi. Every class opened with an attendance question. Something funny, designed to break the ice.

The most recent of which was as follows: what's your spirit animal?

The class went around and gave their answers, and then explained why.

I forgot which animal I chose that night. But on the drive over here, I remembered what I would've chosen, and why.

I would've picked a rooster.

You see, being a grad student is like being a rooster. Every day, when you wake up, you scream.

All jokes aside, the story of the class of 2023 begins around the summer of 2020.

That summer, and the months that followed, were tumultuous. Applying to graduate school in the middle of it all only added to the chaos. In more ways than one, our futures were uncertain. We all needed something to just go our way.

And, as fate would have it, something did. We were all admitted into the School of Social Welfare. Our futures were a little more certain. Admission: It felt like the hardest part was over.

But I'll admit, on the first day, my expectations were as follows: read through the syllabus, maybe do an icebreaker, then grab a coffee from the hospital starbucks.

And while those things did happen on the first day, so did something that would set the tone for every class moving forward: the entire class would engage in a discussion that most people outside the classroom might prefer to shy away from.

The merits of different ideas were discussed in a way that was as difficult as it was necessary. What does systematic injustice look like? How do we advance human rights? How do we achieve true social and economic justice?

I believe it is the emphasis on having these difficult conversations that separates The School of Social Welfare from other institutions of its kind. Conversations about what it means to be culturally competent, what it means to be anti-racist, and the concepts of privilege and merit, are as timely as they are important. We've been taught that we need to welcome them, now more than ever, rather than look away.

These conversations educated us on the deep-seated issues that plague our communities, and the people in it. The more time went on, the more it felt like we were being taught how to try & change the world. It was as humbling, as it was overwhelming. But perhaps the most important thing we've been taught is this: Maybe the most efficient way to try and bring about change in the world is to first try to change *someone's world*.

As to put theory into practice, every student must complete two field placements during this program. My second one was at the very same high school that I attended nearly ten years ago.

My *second* first day of high school, much like my *first* first day of high school, was scary. I was surrounded by people who were much like the professors and administrators here: seasoned vets, masters of the craft. You couldn't help but suffer from imposter syndrome.

That is, until, you finally have a chance to work with a client 1:1. The feeling is hard to describe to someone who has not experienced it firsthand. You can't help but ask yourself if you're making the right choices, saying the right things. And for some, several sessions may go by where you just listen. It is not immediately clear if your client has truly benefited from your time together.

Until one day, I had a client open up for the first time. That afternoon, following a rather difficult session, he looked at me and said "Mr. Parks, I feel better".

And with that Imposter syndrome faded. Class by class, we all had been given the tools to address these problems in real time, and thus, could help the most vulnerable in moments of crisis.

So many of us witnessed these moments of crisis first hand in a school setting. Now, more than ever, is a social work presence needed, in all levels of education.

Accessibility to mental health services in schools, especially for marginalized and underprivileged groups, is an issue many in the class of 2023 have chosen to champion.

Typically, these speeches close with the speaker giving a bit of advice. I am in no more a position to give advice than any other graduate here.

However, I will make a request to my graduating class: Please make an effort to see yourself, the way I see all of you. And if it's alright, I'd like to elaborate on what exactly I mean by that.

Before I was a graduate student, or an intern at a high school, and now a social worker, I was a Sergeant in the United States Army Reserves.

On my very last day, I had a rather mean spirited officer scoff at me, having heard about my social work aspirations. "Talking about problems? Feelings? Well that's just weak" he said.

But the truth is, there will always be people like him. People who believe that going out of your way to be kind to others exudes weakness.

To the graduating class of 2023, the way I see you, every class, every difficult conversation, every day of field, you have proven that man and his words wrong.

You got a masters degree through a pandemic, with many of you working two jobs, some caring for children,

To our guests - your *child*, your *spouse*, your *sibling*, your *friend* in these seats has proven that kindness and strength are not opposing virtues.

They're mutually exclusive.

Thankyou for showing me.

Thankyou for teaching me.

& Thankyou for proving him wrong.