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Two Marathon victims attend BC commencement

By Matt Rocheleau | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 21, 2013

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PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Marathon bombing victims Brittany Loring (left) and Liza Cherney received their diplomas during the BC commencement.

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Liza Cherney and Brittany Loring were standing side-by-side at the Boston Marathon finish line when shrapnel tore through their bodies, leaving them hospitalized for days.

On Monday, the 29-year-old close friends, still with some visible wounds and bandages, came together once more to proudly walk across the stage to receive diplomas from Boston College's Carroll Graduate School of Management.

To the sustained applause of classmates, they marched without crutches, a goal they had set.

"I definitely didn't think I'd be able to walk" unaided in time for graduation, said Loring, a native of Ayer who sustained three leg wounds and a fractured skull. "It's really exciting. It's wonderful."

The two were among the 4,395 BC students to receive - degrees on a sun-dappled day on the Chestnut Hill campus.

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Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland, in a speech at the university's main commencement ceremony that mixed history and personal experience, exhorted graduates to "let go, let fly."

"Be successful, be well, be happy; above all, be yourselves," Kenny said in his 23-minute address inside Alumni Stadium. He also praised Boston's response to the attacks.

"In this city, strength is your default position," said Kenny, who brought flowers to the bombing memorial in Copley Square on Sunday. "The hurt of the Boston Marathon attack is still palpable, but the people of this great city have responded with their usual courage, dignity, and compassion."

He earned a standing ovation from the class of 2013, - assembled on the football field, and the estimated 20,000 guests who filled the bleachers behind them. School officials said past BC commencement speakers have rarely received standing ovations.

Kenny, who was also awarded an honorary doctor of laws degree, did not address the controversy that has swirled recently over his appearance at the school.

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley boycotted the ceremony, where for decades the archbishop of Boston has given the benediction, over Kenny's support of a measure that would permit abortions in cases of a real and substantial threat to the mother's life.

O'Malley said US bishops have urged Catholic institutions not to honor government officials who "promote abortion" with their policies.

About 40 protesters gathered outside the gates to the campus to object to Kenny's appearance. "This clearly violates the teachings of the Catholic Church. BC is hosting a speaker who violates the school's own stance," said Kristan Hawkins, president of Students for Life of America.

Few graduates and their families seemed to notice or care much about the controversy and protests.

"It's unfortunate; this really shouldn't have been made into a political event," said graduate Peter John Augustinos, 22, of Glastonbury, Conn.

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'In this city, strength is your default position.'

Instead, the focus for his family and others was on celebrating achievement.

Wearing cap and gown and holding a bouquet of flowers after the ceremony, Augustinos stood alongside his parents, two younger brothers, and grandmother. The family had a lot to be proud of. In four years, Augustinos completed three majors: classics, philosophy, and economics. He has a job lined up with a software company in Wisconsin.

“I’ve had a lot of great memories with a lot of great people at BC,” he said. “There are some things I look back on and already miss or wish I’d done better. But, mostly, I’m excited for the next step.”

In his poetic and wide-ranging speech, Kenny touched on war, global warming, Rosa Parks, and the 1956 BC commencement address delivered by John Fitzgerald Kennedy, then a US senator, a time when “apples were things we offered the teacher . . . and twitter involved birds that, generally, weren’t blue.”

He also spoke of the deep ties between the United States and Ireland, forged over centuries by immigration and toil.

“Today, the Irish story is writ large across America right to Capitol Hill. The hands roughened in Irish soil were leathered in your mines, your scaffolding, your bridges, your railroads,” he said. “Over the generations, our farmers-turned-laborers saw to it that their children went from the schoolhouse and the firehouse, right to the White House itself.”

Of his invitation to speak at BC, he said: “Know that you honor all the generations of Irish people.”

For Cherney and Loring, the day was a milestone in a recovery that has not been easy. “It’s a struggle,” said Cherney, of Novato, Calif. “You’ve just got to push through physically and emotionally.”

But both women said they are amazed and grateful for the support they’ve received.

Loring’s mother was overwhelmed. “My heart is so full because these girls have been through a lot and they’ve stayed so positive,” said Pamela Loring. “I’m happy, very happy. Overjoyed.”

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com.

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