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| | SECTIONS |  MY SAVED |  |
|--|---|--|---|
| NEWS  | METRO | |  |
| ARTS  | BUSINESS  | | |
| SPORTS  | OPINION  | | |
| LIFESTYLE  | MAGAZINE  | | |
| TODAY'S PAPER  | | | |
| LOTTERY  | OBITUARIES  | | |
| NAMES  | GLOBE NORTH  | | |
| GLOBE SOUTH  | GLOBE WEST  | | |
| INVESTIGATIONS  | | | |

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Speaker's lessons resonate with BC graduates

136th class hears inspirational tale at commencement

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 21, 2012

-  ARTICLE
-  PHOTOS
-  COMMENTS



JOANN RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

Claire Hayes of Mansfield, graduating from Boston College, gave a thumbs-up to her family.

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Journalist Bob Woodruff urged Boston College's 136th graduating class Monday to give back, practice faith, pursue their passions, and never forget the importance of friends and family - lessons he said he learned six years ago on the day he "should have died."

While Woodruff was reporting in Iraq for ABC News on Jan. 29, 2006, he sustained a traumatic brain injury when the military vehicle in which he was traveling struck a roadside bomb. Initially, he was not expected to survive, he said.

One month after he succeeded Peter Jennings as co-anchor of ABC's "World News Tonight," Woodruff was placed into a medically induced coma for 36 days.

After about a year's recovery, which included intense cognitive therapy to recover his speech and language abilities, he returned to reporting, a job he had fallen in love with after growing bored of practicing law.

“I lost many things in that injury,” he told more than 4,400 undergraduate and graduate degree recipients at Alumni Stadium on an overcast, cool morning. “But on balance I’d have to say that I gained many more.”

If he had died in 2006, “by that point in my life, I had achieved all of the things that truly mattered,” Woodruff said, citing his wife, children, and having reached the “pinnacle” of his career.

But Woodruff said his near-death experience recommitted him “to what’s really important.”

“It is the people, my friends and family - the ones who have been and will be there for the long haul,” he said, telling the graduates to thank their loved ones.

Gina Giuggio did just that. After the main ceremony, the 22-year-old graduating English major made her way to the edge of the field. There, she spotted her mother in the bleachers. The two came together, separated by tall stadium railings.

“I’ve been crying nonstop for two days,” said the graduate’s mother, Kathleen Giuggio, who met her husband, Stephen, at Boston College.

Woodruff, whose daughter is a rising sophomore at Boston College, was one of five to receive honorary degrees.

The others were the Rev. Joseph A. Appleyard, a BC alumnus and executive assistant for the New England Province of the Society of Jesus; William V. Campbell, chairman of Intuit Inc.; Navyn A. Salem, an alumna who founded a nonprofit that manufactures food for treating and preventing malnutrition; and Liz Walker, an award-winning journalist and ordained minister who works in international education and on women’s issues.

Rocker Bruce Springsteen’s son and sports journalist Bob Costas’s daughter were also among Monday’s graduates.

Hayden Smith is the first from his family to attend Boston College. In addition to his cap, gown, and maroon-and-gold sash, he wore a pair of leis made by his mother. One featured dollar bills folded into fan-like shapes, the other was strung with small packages of Peanut Butter M&M’s.

Smith said commencement day brought on a mix of emotions: relief to graduate with job prospects, but a realization that the day would include some tough goodbyes.

“I’m unsure,” he said. “I don’t really know how I feel.”

Others were excited to move on.

Tim Jenkel, Chiara DeNatale, Liz Barberio, and Ali Flores said most of their close friends plan to remain in the area. After a week of senior events and parties, including the campus tradition of staying up to watch the sunrise from a campus parking garage on the morning of commencement, the four new graduates were exhausted.

“We’re just happy to graduate,” Jenkel said.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com. For more news from Boston’s neighborhoods and surrounding towns, go to boston.com/yourtown.

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