

Good morning. My name is Mara Bellino and I represent the students graduating today in the exceptional education department, which includes special education, gifted education, and teaching English as a second language. I would like to take a brief moment to share with you how I came to embrace the field of special education and pursue my desire to be a teacher.

August 23, 1997, was a day that forever changed my life. After numerous tests, I learned that I had a learning disability. I let that label define much of my life and at the time, quite negatively. When I was diagnosed the summer before my fifth grade year, I had no clue what “learning disability” meant, why it took me so long to read a passage or why I could never spell anything right. The one thing I did know was that I learned differently than my peers. My constant struggle with school was always discouraging and made me wonder if I would ever go to college. However, the continuous support of my special education teachers, general education teachers, parents, professors, and mentors, throughout my academic career, is the main reason I stand before you today.

Although at times, I still doubt myself and my abilities, their belief in me was (and still is) ever present and thus is a powerful reminder that while education can be challenging, everyone can succeed. I find now that having a learning disability is an integral part of the person I am and the teacher I am becoming.

One educator I learned about this year, Crystal Kuykendall, spoke about bearing good and bringing hope into the lives of others. There was one phrase in particular that remains with me. She said, everyone is a Merchant of Hope. In reflecting back on my years and challenges in learning, my teachers, parents and mentors were without question “merchants of hope for me.”

As special education teachers we are going into the field, skilled and ready to create inclusive settings by evaluating student strengths, setting individualized goals, differentiating instruction, serving as advocates for our students, celebrating their accomplishments, standing by their side as they struggle, empowering them to be self advocates, and most importantly, fostering belief in their abilities.

Before I leave I want to remind everyone here today, James Madison University faculty, staff, family members, friends and myself that we are all as Crystal Kuykendall so poignantly emphasized “merchants of hope.”

As merchants of hope we can help to enrich and shape, the lives of any individual we meet through being a source of education, encouragement and inspiration.

And now, I would like to present the students graduating today from the exceptional education department!