Ambassadore Speech given during April 24th, 2013 Next Steps Graduation

by Crystal Finley

Thank you all so much for the opportunity to be with you today, as we honor the accomplishments of three amazing graduates. Matt, Will and Carrie- I am so grateful to share this memory with you-today and for a lifetime. I look forward to joining you as alumni of the Vanderbilt Class of 2013. Perhaps like you, participation in Next Steps has been the most instrumental and formative part of my college experience. Like you, I have made lifelong friends and have grown in ways that I never expected.

Tonight, I would like to share with you a little bit of my own journey through college, and extend my gratitude to you and the entire Next Steps program for playing such an important role.

As mentioned earlier, I am currently finishing my undergraduate degree in Special Education. However, if you asked me what I would study in college the day I graduated high school, I would have never have been able to tell you this or even that I wanted to become a teacher. Four years ago, I too came to college with the intentions of preparing myself for the future. I elected to study in an engineering field, assured by many that this was a great choice that would lead to great success. Little did I, or anyone else, know that I would learn an entirely different meaning for what it is to find success in life. I will be forever grateful to six friends I made during my freshman year of college who personally opened my eyes to this.

These six friends were part of the first class of students in the Next Steps at Vanderbilt program. I immediately saw a difference that I had not quite seen in my other friendships at school-a difference noted in their unshakeable optimism, infectious enthusiasm, and unconditionally loving hearts. I knew right away I was involved in something truly remarkable, and that I had to seek out more.

So I certainly did. However, I wish I could say that immediately after becoming involved with Next Steps, I switched my major to Special Education, full of confidence and assurance. But it
did not come so easily. I was afraid to tell my friends and family at home of this desire. I was especially terrified to tell them that I was failing in my engineering studies. Unfortunately, there were few things in my first year of college that felt like the person I wanted to be, but there was one activity that I cherished whole-hearedly- being an Ambassador in the Next Steps program. Yet, despite knowing I needed to make a change in my path, I returned for my second year at Vanderbilt and continued on as a student in the School of Engineering.

The fall semester of my sophomore year was one of my most challenging times, but I am now so thankful to have learned what I did. In addition to personal challenges, this was the first time in my life that I failed academically. Thankfully, in this failure, I found the courage to make a change and to shift my perspective of success. I listened to what I wanted to do- not what anyone else wanted- when deciding who I wanted to be in the world. I quickly applied to transfer into Special Education, and more than two years later, this decision remains the best I have ever made.

As you can see, I was wrong when I thought that success meant I would never fail at something. I was also wrong when I thought success meant that I should be something just because others thought I should, even though this wasn’t what I wanted. I’m here to tell you that it doesn’t matter if you ever feel like you’ve struggled or failed at something. All that matters is you learn something, get back up, and keep trying. I also found that it is your road, and your road only. Others may walk it with you, but no one can walk it for you. In short, I found that success was being the person that I wanted to be and living this with joy.

It is through the Ambassador program that I found this very person. After three years, I am tremendously grateful and humbled by the many gifts this program has brought to me. As Ambassadors, we also hear constant “thank yous”. But today, I am here to say thank you to all involved in sustaining this program. I cannot even measure just how much this program has given me. But mostly, I am thankful for friendship, and I have three people to specifically mention today.
Matt, Will, and Carrie... it has been an honor to be your classmate, your Ambassador, and your friend. From the moment you stepped onto this campus in the Fall of 2011 to now, you have taught me and so many others more than we ever expected to learn in college. You have given me countless moments of joy, friendship, and inspiration. I am so proud of what you have accomplished academically and professionally over the past two years, but I’m mostly inspired by the men and women that you are. You bring me joy each and every day in the little things you do.

Carrie, you have taught me what it means to have courage. You are always ready to try something new, and you always do it with a smile. I will never forget when we both rode a tandem bike for the first time. It was scary for both of us, but your courage and determination encouraged me to try that day.

Will, you have taught me what it means to work hard and to be proud of who you are. Your work ethic and excitement for everything you do is admirable. It was motivating to see how much love you had for each one of your internships, every time you went. You are such an advocate for yourself and others.

Matt, it has been an honor to be in your circle every semester. You have taught me what it means to be a friend. When we were on spring break together, you were always asking for a way to help someone else. You show me how to give to others without ceasing, and to do it with joy.

Now, even though I will miss attending football games or studying outside Peabody library with you all, I could not be more excited for you to go out into the world. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to go into the world and be a special education teacher- a career that I would not have realized I loved so much until I began this program. I will be forever grateful to this program, the students, and the alumni for helping me understand who I want to be. One thing I have certainly learned is that success is not measured by the magnitude of the things you do, but rather the magnitude of the love and dedication you have for what you do. Matt, Will, and Carrie- your
impact on the world does not stop here; in fact, it will be even greater. I urge you to go confidently, and be exactly who you are. You have given me so much, by doing just that.