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Commencement Address

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Thank you President Nugent.

Good morning/**afternoon** class of 2021, parents, faculty, Trustees, friends and family.

Today is truly a momentous day. For the graduates, it's a capstone -- the culmination of hard work, many hours of study, frantic last minute submittals, exams, papers and projects, endless zoom calls, and, suddenly, here you are. Ready to cross the stage and receive your diplomas. Ready to start your careers, or ready to continue your studies.

To your parents, family, friends and community – my heartiest congratulations. No one gets here alone, and your love and support have made this day possible for the class of 2021.

I'd like to do a quick shout out to my own friends and family who are here to be part of this celebration. A special thanks to my husband Jay, Illinois Wesleyan Class of '79; to Bonnie and Larry Shields – a brother and sister to me; to Lauri Connelly, Illinois Wesleyan Class of '92 and a most special niece; and to the Acacia Fraternity brothers who are here to support me. Thank you all for being here and for your constant support and love.

So graduates It's hard to start any conversation these days without acknowledging the impact COVID 19 has had on all of us this past year. And what a year it's been. COVID has taken so much from us – both big and small, and its impact has been felt by every person in our world.

We've lost so much. We've seen friends and family get ill, and some have passed away. Many have experienced this deep loss without being able to appropriately pay their respects or be able to provide comfort to loved ones.

You've missed so much. The lockdown in Illinois began while you were on spring break last year. Spring break was extended a week, and then you pivoted to online classes. You had no chance to say goodbye to friends, classmates, professors, and others special to you.

The following fall when you returned to campus, you were COVID tested and quarantined for a bit. You began mostly online classes, while a few of you attended some classes in person, or in a hybrid mode. No fall break, no spring break. Social activities were discouraged, mask wearing was required, athletic events were limited, nothing was normal. Nothing looked like it did before COVID. Not exactly the kind of senior year you looked forward to when you were a freshman or sophomore.

And I've felt it first-hand. My daughter Carolyn is a senior in college. I've seen her grieve the loss of experiences and opportunities that she can never regain. I get it.

But like her, here you are. You've made it. You've somehow managed to keep going and persevere in the face of incredible uncertainty and tediousness.

I think one thing that the pandemic has taught all of us is the importance of human connection. The need for sharing and connecting with those we hold dear – be it family members or close friends. Perhaps the pandemic's enduring lesson will be to never take for granted, to treasure and nurture, the special relationships in our lives. All of us coming together today, to celebrate you and your accomplishments, is in fact a testament to just that. So don't take today for granted – when the ceremony is over, please take a moment to personally acknowledge your gratitude for those relationships. Please thank those that made it a lot, or even just a little, easier to get to that stage and that diploma. You won't regret it.

Now, because you are all extremely intelligent and highly educated soon-to-be-official graduates of Illinois Wesleyan University, you have undoubtedly figured out by now that this COVID pandemic will *not* be the last challenge you will face in your lives. There will be countless other challenges, big and small, that you will have to meet. To that end, President Nugent has asked me to share my personal journey, and to briefly describe how I've faced challenges -- with perseverance, confidence, and the backing of special relationships -- in the hope that I might in some small way inspire you to do the same.

I am an immigrant. I was born in Cuba, where my father was imprisoned for years on *suspicion* of holding anti-communist beliefs. My parents and I left Cuba as political refugees, fleeing the communist stronghold that had gripped our

country. We came here to the United States, without much more than the clothes on our backs.

I was five years old. It was scary -- coming to a new country, not speaking the language, not familiar with the culture -- but my parents believed this was a place where they could build a better life, where they could be free to make choices important to them. And they had the courage to leave their country, their language, and their culture, to seek that better life.

The three of us first landed in St. Paul, Minnesota where we couldn't *believe* how cold a midwestern winter could get. This was not the Cuban subtropics! We soon moved to balmy northern New Jersey. It wasn't much warmer, but we had heard there were more work opportunities there, and more people who spoke Spanish.

To me, it seemed my parents worked day and night. My dad held multiple jobs -- factory work during the day, washing dishes at a restaurant at night, and stocking shelves at the local supermarket over the weekend. My mom did piecemeal work at home, making a few pennies for each dozen lace collars she hand-trimmed and tied in bundles.

Through perseverance, courage, hard work and grit, they were somehow able to save enough money to buy a small grocery store -- a bodegita - where I would work after school when I was a kid. While other girls had ballet lessons or Brownie meetings after school, I worked the cash register, giving my mom a much needed break so she could go home and make dinner at our nearby apartment.

Those were tough days. We worked hard. Seven days a week and no vacations. But I look back on that time, and not only was it formative, I have to say I loved it! You see, I didn't view myself as just a part-time cashier -- I was helping run the family business. I was the official interpreter, my English having already surpassed that of my parents. I helped my dad with real estate closings, accounting matters, and any and all legal issues. I was part of the community. I learned, at an early age, the importance of good customer service and human connections.

Over time, my parents were able to flip that little grocery store and buy a slightly bigger one ... and then flip the next one to buy another ... and then another. They became quite successful, and I'm very proud of them. They taught me the value of hard work and that every job is important, no matter how small that job may be, and, by extension, that every worker is important.

I grew up believing that almost anything was possible if you had the courage and the perseverance to go for it. Because, after all, my parents had shown me just that, through their own example.

To me, success meant going to college and getting a good job. I went to the University of Miami – yes, I'm a proud Hurricane! -- where I got my degree in engineering. After graduating college – the first in my family to do so – I started my career working for the local power company, Florida Power & Light.

Early in my career at Florida Power and Light, I had a great mentor named Clark Cook. One day he asked me, "Geisha, what are your long term career objectives? Where do you see yourself in the future?"

To be honest, I didn't have huge aspirations at that point. I didn't have role models at home who were in the corporate world. But I thought I might one day work my way into management and become a supervisor, and that's what I told him.

And then he said something that stopped me in my tracks. He said, "Geisha, someone has to run this company someday, why not you?"

I think I was 25 at the time and to be honest, the idea of running the company never once crossed my mind.

"Why not you?"

I think we all can remember certain pivotal moments in our lives that rocked our world ... well, this was mine.

"Why not you?"

Well, for starters, women didn't run big companies back then ... and Latina women certainly didn't. Immigrants? Forget about it.

But that one simple question -- "Why not you?" -- kind of lit a fire. It opened my eyes. It gave me permission to think bigger than I was allowing myself to think. Over the weeks and months that followed, I kept thinking about it, and I slowly started to wonder if it was possible. I started thinking that, if I held the right jobs, got the right experience and continued my education, maybe I could someday be something beyond a supervisor.

For me, "Why not you?" became something of a mantra throughout my career which continues to this day. Difficult roles, assignments, or opportunities turned into, "Someone has to do it - Why not me?" So I took on the tough jobs. I stretched myself. And soon I developed a reputation for being a problem solver.

Each time I was successful in a difficult assignment or role, I got noticed by my superiors, and increased my confidence. I took that confidence to the next role, and to the one after that. I believe confidence is like a muscle -- the more you exercise it, the stronger it gets. I exercised mine a lot, and it kept getting stronger.

In March of 2017, about 30 years after my "Why not you" discussion with Clark Cook, I became CEO of the largest combined natural gas and electric energy company in the United States. When I'm asked how someone like me -- a Latina woman, immigrant, first in my family to go to college -- got to be the first Latina CEO of a Fortune 200 company, I tell them, "Someone had to do it, why not me?"

Now ... why am I telling you that story?

I'm sharing it because it's the way I think about leadership and the many challenges our country and world face. "Why not you" is the question I always ask myself when faced with a new challenge. It's simple, and it's short, but I believe it holds great power.

There are no shortages of challenges in our world: Climate change, systemic racism, poverty, global pandemics, environmental injustice, inequality. The list goes on.

These are complicated global problems with no easy solutions. No one person can solve these issues. But someone has to be willing to step up and try.

So now, I pose this question to you Class of 2021: Why not you?

I'm looking out right now at an audience that I have no doubt includes future leaders in our government and our communities ... business leaders and entrepreneurs ... scientists and innovators ... justice advocates and environmental leaders ... teachers, nurses, doctors and lawyers all ready to help where and how you can.

All of you are going to have opportunities to be part of the solution on many critical issues... perhaps challenges that may be the defining issues of our lifetimes, or issues important to the specific people you work with and care about.

They may be big opportunities, or they may be small. It might be a chance to help millions, it might be a chance to help one.

Regardless, when those opportunities come along, my hope is that you'll hear that question ringing in your ears - - Why not you?

Let it be more than a rhetorical question. Let it be a challenge to yourself. Let it be a call to action. Let it be an inspiration to make a difference. And lean in. I promise you, the confidence you will gain from tackling difficult issues is a gift you will carry forward in your life. Be confident in your capabilities and in your ability to learn what you don't know. Be confident in breaking problems down and seeking help where you need it. Build that confidence muscle.

These four years at Illinois Wesleyan have prepared you for an exciting future. You've already learned that through perseverance, tenacity, hard work and grit you can overcome something as big as a global pandemic, and that should give you confidence. That should give you courage.

So Class of 2021 – Illinois Wesleyan Titans – use your education. Exercise your confidence muscle. Be courageous. Be tenacious. And work hard.

Because someone has to step up to meet the challenges of tomorrow. Why not you?!!

Thank you and congratulations!
