

MCC COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

Dr. Regina Barreca

Congratulations to the Manchester Community College graduating class of 2009, to their proud and relieved extended families, to their proud and excited friends, and to their proud and thoroughly exhausted professors and support staff here at MCC. I am grateful and honored to be part of the celebration here this evening. Thank you for inviting me.

I actually love graduation ceremonies because you can count on the fact that everybody present is happy to be here, something which sets graduations apart from, for example, weddings, where there's usually an aunt in the back whispering loudly enough for the entire room to hear: "This won't last. I got her a gift she can return if it doesn't work out."

Everybody looks perfect in a graduation gown—which is why I insist (and family members can quote me on this) that the graduates permit all kinds of photography. Don't make faces if you think you look dorky. You are not permitted to act like Angelina Jolie or Sean Penn waving away the paparazzi. Smile for the camera. You'll be glad you did.

Manchester Community College has given you the perfect education for whatever it is you need to do next. One reason they call this ceremony a "commencement" is because it's all about a new beginning. This event celebrates the beginning of a new part of your lives. It's an acknowledgement that you're now better prepared for what's ahead, more eager to accept the challenge, and more able to see, and to rectify, injustice and inequality. Getting an education isn't easy. Any of you who had to take required courses in subjects over which you had very little mastery know what that feels like.

The great thing about an education is that nobody can take it away from you--in my old neighborhood in Brooklyn, that was an especially important consideration. An education is portable property; you take it with you everywhere you go and it shows every time you open your mouth to make a good point or a smart joke, and it shows every time you write a letter to your best friend or your congressional representative. I'm assuming that for most of you, your congressional representative is not your best friend... But one day, who knows? One day the folks you're graduating with right now will be running the show. I remember somebody handing me a Doonesbury cartoon when I was in college. It said "The people you're going to school with right now will one day run the world" and I was thinking that I wouldn't even let most of the kids I was graduating with drive me the Store 24 let alone have them run the world, but time sneaks up on you and suddenly all grown-ups are your age. The people over forty here tonight probably know what I mean. About ten years ago I realized that all doctors and cops looked really young to me-- I kept saying, "Boy, there are a lot of rookies out tonight," or "How come all these physicians are interns?" only to be told that these people were the real thing, it was just that they were younger than I was. But back to you, Class of 2009.

By graduating tonight, you've all obviously followed the world's great truisms: that 95 percent of life is showing up. My advice to you is to keep showing up. Attend events, and attend to your

life. You've done well so far and you should give yourselves credit. Think of yourselves as successful. Embody your success; let it shine, and illuminate the world with it. By graduating tonight, you've proven that you are indeed a successful student. For just one moment, consider the privilege of being allowed to participate in this tradition--and not the tradition of those great films about education--Animal House and Old School--but the real tradition. I often think about those people to whom, historically, an education was denied: women, Blacks, Jews, any new immigrant group--who all found it difficult if not impossible to be allowed to be in a classroom. Until all too recently, education remained a gentleman's territory so that if your family wasn't rich, there was no way you would make it through school. A true education is not about climbing a ladder to get above other people; it's about reaching a place where you can get the best, the widest, the least restricted and least restrictive view.

And I would encourage you to look at yourself with imagination; what have you got inside you that can't be seen? (Besides a Diet Coke or Snickers bar). I'd like you to take imagination seriously, and I'd like you to take some risks--not stupid risks, any moron can smoke cigarettes or drive fast--but worthwhile risks. I'd like to encourage you to not to be too cool or too hip or too cynical to enjoy your education and your intelligence. I'd like to encourage you to risk doing things you're not sure you'll do well.

I'll tell you one of my own stories about taking a chance. When I was a student at Cambridge University, I was also working for British television. A producer asked me to appear on a TV show that was a sort-of grown-up version of College Bowl. You sat under a spotlight on a stage and an announcer fired questions at you concerning a special subject and what was vaguely titled "general knowledge." You had to answer as many questions as you could within the space of three minutes. If you didn't know the answer, you had to say, "pass" because you risked losing points with an incorrect response--sort of like the SATs. The producer explained that the show had been syndicated in seven or eight countries but the show never made it to the States. Would I consider, he asked, acting as the official American contestant. I had never seen the program, but my British boyfriend of the moment had--and he whispered that I shouldn't even consider such a thing. He said, and I quote: "You'll look silly." That, of course, made my decision for me. I agreed; I would show him.

Then I actually watched the terrible, maniacal, sadistic show and was pretty unnerved. I chose the life and works of the playwright Tennessee Williams as my special subject. When a month or so passed, I showed up with a remarkably bad cold, runny nose and red eyes, fuzzy on cough syrup and mad at the boyfriend who refused to accompany me. I did all right on Williams, but when it came to "general knowledge" I knew almost none of the questions they asked, many of which had to do with American geography that I knew almost nothing about. I could not name all the states run-through by the Mason-Dixon Line. I did not know the highest point in Utah. I did not know the estimated population of Atlanta. The poor audience members were holding their breath in appalled silence as I kept saying "pass" over and over again. They the talks show hosts asked me one glorious question: "What kind of animal is a guppy?" and I screamed out "IT'S A FISH!" to wild applause. The people in the audience were so relieved that I got one right they forgave me everything. They whistled, they stamped their feet; I didn't look silly to them, although I certainly looked like somebody who beat the odds. I discovered at that moment that anything worth doing was worth doing, period--worth doing well, or even badly if you couldn't

do better, or any way, as long as it is something that gets done with enthusiasm. I've since tried to improve my geography skills, believe me . . .and I bought one of those map-reading GPS systems as soon as you could get one at the Best Buy in Manchester.

Finally, I want to encourage you to speak up; not necessarily to make trouble but to make yourself heard. Ask your questions out loud; risk looking like a fool by yelling out “It’s a GUPPY!”-- and you might just get applause because if you have one way of looking at the world and are willing to risk making it public, you can bet that other people will be glad to see their own experiences mirrored by yours. You can never be sure of, and you certainly can't control, how other people react. But asking questions and speaking up are like laughing out loud; even if not many others seem to be doing the same thing, what you've made isn't a mistake. What you've made is a beginning. Congratulations, MCC graduates of the class of 2009, to your own terrific beginning.