

## Megan Speech

Thank you so much for this honor. I'd like to thank the Women's Studies Department for considering me and my accomplishments as something to be awarded. I'd also like to thank Iris Marion Young for living her life in such a way that inspires others to follow her footsteps in becoming activists for social justice. A special thank you to Gayle Mallinger for introducing me to the field of social work and constantly encouraging me to reach my full potential as a student and as a social worker. Also, a thank you to the school of social work and all those who have taught me to develop the knowledge, skills, and values essential to a social work education. And last, but certainly not least, thank you to my family and wonderful boyfriend who have supported me each and every step of the this journey. Your support means so much to me.

Thinking about what I, as an undergraduate student, could share with you that would possibly enrich your experience today was quite a challenge. Surrounded by such successful people, I certainly did feel comfortable flaunting my accomplishments. So, rather than discussing what I have accomplished, I've decided to talk about the challenges that I've faced in coming to where I am today.

As a young person, we are constantly in a period of change. It is often difficult to maintain a consistent identity when going through such major life transitions from high school to college to graduate school and then away from the comfort of academia into the real world with its many challenges. These types of transitions are something that I've struggled with quite a lot.

During high school, I established my identity as a young feminist by helping to found a women's social justice program aimed at educating high school girls about the issues facing women today. For this work, I had the honor of becoming one of the youngest winners of the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Award for Public Service along with two of my classmates. And then...I graduated. I left everything that I knew and the identity that was so well established to head off to a small liberal arts school on the east side of Cleveland. There, I lost myself in the freshman experience and with that, I saw my feminist identity and love for social justice work drifting away. That's when I made the decision to leave that school and come to this wonderful university where I had the opportunity for a brand new start. During this transition I was still exceptionally lost, but this time I made a concerted effort to reestablish my identity. In this transition, I have become a student of the school of social work and became heavily involved in the university community, including joining a mentoring organization called Strong Women Strong Girls, whose mission is, "to utilize the lessons learned from strong women throughout history to encourage girls and young women to become strong women themselves. By building communities of women committed to supporting positive social change, Strong Women, Strong Girls works to create cycles of mutual empowerment for women and girls." Here I have reconnected with my identity and my passion.

The point of this story is not to talk about my life, but to challenge all of us not to lose ourselves in the big transitions, or even the ins and outs of day to day life. Often it is so easy to become caught up in the big changes or the stressors of everyday life that we forget to focus on the things that we are passionate about. When we lose this, we are doing a disservice to ourselves and all those people

who have come before us, working tirelessly for their cause. In the next year, I will be graduating and facing yet another one of these major transitions. I am confident this time that I will not lose my identity as a feminist or my passion for social justice. I hope that each and every one of us can maintain that passion as well.