

Coleman Commencement Address 2011

Mary Ann Forgey, Ph.D, LCSW, Coleman Class of 1973



I am very honored to be here today as your commencement speaker. Many of you know me by my other name, Mrs. Lombardi, the wife of

the Hoops Across the Ocean guy. And a few of you may also know me as the lady who taught Chris Chatlain how to parallel park. But today, I want to speak to you about my other identity and that is, as a Coleman alumnus.

Thirty eight years ago I sat in your seat, as a member of the John A. Coleman graduating class of 1973. I remember feeling so excited about the future, I was moving to Boston!! I would be attending Boston College. I was looking ahead not back. I am sure many of you are feeling that way right now.



Dr. Forgey & Principal Tullo enjoying a surprise performance!

But today, I want to look back on my Coleman experience and share with you what I have come to value most about it. I believe that my time away from Coleman since graduating in 1973 has given me a keener appreciation of the seeds that were first planted here. I hope that some of what I have to say will strike a cord with you. While some things about Coleman have changed, I think more has remained the same.

First of all, I learned some very important lessons from the teachers. At that time, the faculty was made up of the Sisters of St. Ursula, headed by Sister Catherine Gormley, who served as Principal, the Marist Brothers and some lay faculty members, including by the way, Les Lombardi, who became my husband 25 years later. But that is a whole other story and Mr. Tullo told me that I only have 10 minutes!!

I remember that the faculty was very knowledgeable about their subject matter. The Sisters, made absolutely sure of that. They were also passionate about teaching. But what

I remember most about them was the care they showed for each of us. And this I have come to believe is the most critical ingredient to being an effective teacher. Knowledge and passion are necessary but they are not sufficient.

In my mind "little Sister Mary Eileen" who stood about 4' 11" and weighed all of 100 lbs. embodied all of these characteristics, knowledge passion and care. She knew math and loved teaching it. But she was most known for her ability to reach those students who struggled with math and actually get them excited about it. And her secret weapon, which was shared by the other faculty as well, was the care demonstrated for each and every student. Through her example, I have come to understand on a deeper level the New Testament passage from Corinthians, "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing".

Sr. Mary Eileen and the other Coleman faculty have greatly influenced my work both as a social worker and as a professor at Fordham. As a social worker, my interest has been in working with populations that are often very difficult to reach, involuntary clients mandated by law to see a social worker or military service members, who often resist getting help for their psychological injuries out of fear that they will appear weak. In working with these populations, I have come to realize over and over again the power of Sr. Eileen's secret weapon. All of the social work theories and techniques in the world will get me nowhere unless I also convey a sincere sense of care for that person. But I have also come to appreciate the challenge of caring. It is not always easy to do! And I stand in awe of those who taught me these first lessons about its importance because they made it look so easy.

I know that many of you have also experienced the power of care during your years here at Coleman. Your appreciation of it comes through in the dedication written in the yearbook to Mr. Sampson. I have also had the privilege of witnessing the care shown to you by the Coleman staff, teachers, coaches and parents. I have seen Mr. Tullo here at Coleman at all hours of the day and night. While the position of principal is no longer occupied by a Sister of St. Ursula, I think that he has certainly carried on their values and could definitely qualify as an honorary member.

And I can say with full confidence that the expectation that teachers be knowledgeable,

passionate and caring is as alive today as it was in 1973.

The second aspect of Coleman that I have come to value was the experience of community. The small student body (large by today's standards) allowed us to get to know each other much more deeply and intimately. In my class there were 100 students total and I knew everyone, those who had my interests and those who had very different interests. This experience would not happen at a much larger school. Coleman also offered lots of activities as it does today, like Children's Theatre and sports teams that help foster a sense of community. And everyone got to participate in some way. As a result of this experience we knew the feeling of belonging and being a part of something bigger than ourselves.

Given the size of your class, 35 strong, I have no doubt that you have experienced this same sense of community in an even more intense way during the time you have spent here. Your smallness has given you a very unique experience. I am sure you know every single one of your classmates, their likes and dislikes, how you are similar and how you are different and despite differences, you have learned how to get along.

Coleman has also given you so many opportunities to be a part of something. As I looked through your yearbook, I am absolutely amazed at the number of clubs and organizations that exist given the size of this school. In fact, it made me wonder, when did you ever have time to go to class?

In addition to all of the clubs, you also have the absolutely amazing Music and Theatre program. And then on top of that, there are all of the sports teams. I counted them. In addition to our State Championship Girls Basketball Team and Boys State Finalist Basketball Team..... there are 13 other Varsity and JV sport teams. And ALL of them have a boys and girls team, which is something that is different from 1973 when the most popular sports for girls were cheerleading and twirling!! As a result of all this opportunity, I have no doubt that you too know what it is like to be part of something bigger than yourselves.

There is however a slight downside to this experience that I feel compelled to recognize. And that is, you may feel a bit at sea when you leave here and are all of a sudden without it. The spirit of community just doesn't happen. It may take a while for you to find your niche again. Be



Judy Hansen '73, MaryAnn Forgey '73 & Charlene Gregory '73 enjoying a sidewalk cafe in Laussann, Switzerland on March 25, 1972. This photo is a Polaroid that has survived the test of time taken by fellow Coleman student Nancy Harkins '71.

patient. Just remember how it felt to belong and be a part of something and use this experience to make good choices as you go out and build a new community for yourself. And as Karisa's yearbook quote says, "Don't cry because it is over, smile because it happened".

The third aspect of my Coleman experience that I have come to value is how we were given the opportunity to connect with the "outside world." The Sisters of St. Ursula were very wise. They made sure that we didn't just stay in the safe confines of our Coleman community.

While being connected to each other was important, what was equally important was pushing us out into the world, so we could learn what the world had to teach us beyond the walls of Coleman HS. And push us they did!! In my junior year, the Sisters organized a trip to France for our French class. For many of us it was a first time on an airplane and the first time outside of the US. Now being 16, we were not really looking forward to experiencing a different culture, whatever that meant, and we really had no intention of speaking French. We were

basically just excited about hanging out together on a trip, which is what we did, for at least most of it. Then came Easter weekend when we were supposed to all stay together at the convent at Tours. Except the Sisters, one of whom you know, Sister Elizabeth DiTolla, who is in our midst today, had a different plan for us and I have the pictures to prove it. Unbeknownst to us, the Sisters had matched us up with different French families and so off we went, separately, for the weekend with these strangers who didn't even speak English! I remember out of desperation speaking my first words in French and how surprised I was when they actually understood me and responded. I did not realize it at the time but this was a truly transformative experience. I must admit, however, that right then, I mostly just felt perturbed at the Sisters for yanking me away from my friends for the weekend.

But this experience planted another seed and that is, there is a whole other world out there. As rocky of a start as it was, I think it was the beginning of my love affair with travel, my desire to learn about other cultures and my interest to live and work in another country, which I did in 1983 when I moved to Germany. While my work was on an American military base, I lived in an apartment in the German community and actually learned to speak conversational German because like that unforgettable weekend in France, I had to! More recently, as part of the Fulbright Scholar Program, I had the opportunity to live in Dublin, Ireland for a semester and teach at University College Dublin (UCD). It was during this time that Hoops Across the Ocean was born. In a pub late at night on the UCD campus, my husband and I met some Irish basketball junkies. So

the seeds that the Sisters of St. Ursula planted way back when in France had now taken root in Ireland, and in a pub no less! As you know, the Hoops program has recently expanded to China. So you can see, they are very powerful seeds!

Some of you have had the opportunity to be "pushed out into the world" by being part of Hoops Across the Ocean. You have travelled with Coleman to Ireland and have hosted the Irish and Chinese teams here at Coleman. I also know that Coleman has continued its wonderful tradition of bringing the "outside world in" by having international students as a part of the student body. Two of the international students are graduating today. Thank you for expanding the Coleman world by your presence.

And the yearbook quote selected by your classmate, Nicholas, speaks to the openness so needed in the world today, "Smile at strangers, look into their eyes, and say hello."

So now I have shared with you three things that I have come to value about my Coleman days: The power of caring; the importance of community, of being with people who support and accept you; and the need to learn from others, particularly those who are different from ourselves. And I believe all of these things are alive and well at Coleman today.

So I hope by sharing with you some of the experiences that I had at Coleman, it has sparked some feelings about your own time here. You are leaving Coleman today with a strong foundation born of a long and rich tradition that has stood the test of time. Good and powerful seeds have been planted, some have already taken root, you are ready!

Thank you very much.

Reflections on Graduation 2011 by Principal Louis Tullo



The Coleman Graduation is really a special event. It lasts over 90 minutes, and no one feels there is a wasted minute. Most schools want the ceremony

to go as quickly as possible so the graduates and the families and friends can move out. Not here!

And those 90 minutes are just a small part of the entire morning and afternoon event. Before the graduation, students arrive for breakfast (sponsored by the parents) and their last meetings with the other seniors as their last moments together as undergraduates. After

the graduation, people mill about, tears and laughter abound, and goodbyes take their time.

The 2011 event was unique. There were co-valedictorians. Reece Kearney and Alex Quilty shared this honor. Instead of a valedictory and a salutatory address, there were two valedictory addresses. Following Reece's address (he went second), these two talented young men arranged a special incident. Alex stood up and commented out loud about Reece's address. The two boys bantered about which was better and then broke out in song, singing, "Anything you can do, I can do better." This was prearranged and rewritten for the words to apply to high school. Alex and Reece were talented theatre students with great voices. The plan was kept secret with only Mrs. Hopson (our theatre maestro), the accompanist, and myself aware. It was a showstopper and very

much unique for these two boys.

And like all the recent graduations, when we did our scholarships and honors, the students showed how close they have become as a group. There was cheering and applause as each recipient received their award.

I wish we could show our graduation to all the 8th graders and their parents in this region. Our graduation ceremony so typifies why this school is special and why it's worth the sacrifice to send students here.

The keynote address was from Dr. Mary Anne Forgey ('73). One of the highlights of her speech was her recollection of the trip to France with her peers and the Sisters.

Since I have been an educator for 44 years and 14 years as a principal, there is no graduation ceremony that compares to ours!