

MacEwan University
Spring 2024 Convocation Address
June 19, 2024

Dr. Ruth Collins Nakai

Eminent Chancellor Fields, President Trimbee, Board Chair Graham, Indigenous Leaders & Elders, Honoured Guests, Family & Friends, Distinguished Colleagues, and most importantly, the MacEwan Graduates of 2024.

Thank you for your warm words of introduction. And special thanks to the Board and Management of MacEwan University for selecting me for this honour.

I acknowledge again that we are on Treaty Six Territory and I pay tribute to the outstanding efforts being made by MacEwan University to honour and respect the history, languages, ceremonies, and culture of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit who call this territory home.

Today, it is all about the graduates of the Faculty of Health & Community Studies, many of whom are first responders or are dealing with children. I am so excited to speak to you about all the opportunities you have – it makes me wish I were starting over again!

Before we get to the opportunities and challenges you may face, I thought it might be helpful if I disclose a few of the lessons I have learned along the way.

One of the first things I learned is that change is inevitable. Our world is changing, sometimes not for the better! But every change provides an opportunity to solve a problem. You have lived and learned through the changes that Covid brought. The fact that you are graduating today is a tribute to your resilience, perseverance and determination in completing your studies and training. These are values that almost come naturally to people who wish to succeed. But you may want to think about other values that can guide you when you are challenged or when you must make difficult decisions – especially in healthcare and other community professions where you may be called upon to make decisions on behalf of others. It is not easy to sort out your own personal values because it means analyzing and perhaps questioning the values of the family with whom you grew up, and your religious teachings, and authoritative figures in your lives. Once you have discovered what is truly important to you as a person - your values - you will have gained the confidence and some of the skills necessary for leadership.

Let me give you an example: I once looked after a lovely baby who had severe heart disease. She required many surgeries as an infant and child and by middle childhood, her heart was no longer able to sustain her, and she had a heart transplant. After a while, the heart began to be rejected by her body and she required a second transplant. By now she was a teenager, dreaming about her future. And then, disaster, she again developed rejection of the new heart. She was no longer a teenager, but a young adult. That young woman and I had many conversations about her future and her medical care.

Then one day she told me that not only was she going to refuse another heart transplant, but that she wished to stop taking her anti-rejection drugs. That meant a certain and relatively quick death. She asked for my support in this decision, and further, asked that I help her tell her parents of the decision. This request went against everything I had been taught about the sanctity of life and of doing everything in one's power to help people live. Do I respect the patient's wishes or try further treatment? Conversations were held with the Ethics Committee, psychiatrists, and with religious leaders, and in the end, I and most people involved supported that brave young woman's decision. I re-learned from that experience that it is important to listen to your patients, and for that matter, to others, show respect and compassion and support a person's dignity – and their decisions.

My support of this patient's choice put me into hot water with some who thought I should override the patient's choice and force her to continue her medications. Supporting her took courage because it was going against the accepted norm at that time. I had to defend myself – and could only do so once I was clear on my own values. In today's world, patients do have the ability to make choices for themselves without coercion, choices that are respected by the system.

So, values do become important and strong values turn into ethical leadership. You will become leaders, mark my words! You are in the top 5% of people in the world by virtue of your education. Whether you wish it or not, you will be thrown into leadership positions in your workplaces, hospitals, your communities, your children's schools, and in multiple places within your professions.

That brings me to another point: your relationships are extremely important in determining your future. How you treat people is important – respect, kindness, benevolence. Are you able to put yourself in someone else's shoes? To try to understand another perspective, why someone might be afraid or lashing out? It is often the little kindnesses that people remember. A group of kind people very quickly creates a community, and it is the small group of people in our communities around us that sustain us through life's inevitable challenges.

The third idea I want convey is the importance of education and life-long learning. You thought you were finished with studying! Not by a long shot! So long as you are working in community organizations, you will be expected to keep learning.

I had the good fortune of serving on the Canadian Council for Early Child Development with the renown Dr. Fraser Mustard. He worked with others to disseminate information about how brain development during the first years of life sets the stage for health and wellbeing throughout life. We know now that if young children are safe and secure, fed and sheltered, loved and not exposed to violence that they have a higher chance of graduating high school, of holding employment, and much less chance of mental illness, addiction, heart or lung disease and even incarceration or violence. I had not learned about that during my specialty training, but I became as passionate as he was for advocating for policies in support of young children. We do not do very well here in Alberta for our young children what with no full day or junior kindergarten and insufficient number and quality of child care spaces but I have no doubt that those of you in Child & Youth

Care and Early Childhood studies will also be boldly advocating about the need for change in our policies about children in Alberta & beyond.

Our knowledge base is increasing rapidly, primarily through research so whenever you have an opportunity, participate in research. It is those of us who rely on evidence and science who must speak out against the mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories so prevalent on social media these days.

Why am I mentioning these ideas? Values, relationships, education?

It turns out that a person who has graduated from one of the healthcare or caring fields, who knows their own values, treats people well and continues to learn is virtually guaranteed a job pretty well worldwide. There is a shortage of healthcare providers across North America, Europe, and Africa so you have tremendous opportunities. And you are, mostly, Gen Z born between 1997 and 2012. You are perfectly positioned to step into leadership positions as a shortage of leaders becomes more acute due to the retirement of Baby Boomers and even Gen Xers. Gen Z is becoming known for its refusal to accept old ways of doing things, of profligate waste or inefficiency or of injustice so I have no doubt that you will not only help your patients but the systems in which you work.

Time for celebration! Dream big, and be courageous about doing things differently! Your fabulous faculty instructors have taught you well, so it is now up to you to go out and use what you have learned.

Grant MacEwan, the namesake for this University, who died in 2000 said: "I am prepared to stand before my Maker.....with no other plea than that I have tried to leave things in His Vineyard better than I found them".

Your job now is to leave things in His Vineyard better than you find them. Say "yes" to opportunities even if you are frightened; treat setbacks as learning opportunities. Keep moving forward and upward. I am certain that your efforts will make this world a better place!

More than a century ago, the author, Edward Everett Hale once said:

"I am only one,
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something;
And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do".

Congratulations once again and thank you graduates, esteemed dignitaries, members of the faculty, proud parents, families and friends for giving me the honour of addressing you.