As graduates you represent the collective hopes and dreams of our institution. Each of us at Ferris State University, faculty, staff, administration, and yes, fellow students, look to you as the result of our collective efforts. In some ways for me this occasion feels similar to the emotion one sometimes experiences as a parent at graduations, weddings, and when someone is leaving home to set out on their own. These are major crossroads that help define life. As a parent, friend, colleague, and yes, as teacher, you look at someone that you’ve tried to help guide, grow, and evolve and wonder if you’ve done enough, if there is some last piece of information or advice that you might give that might make a difference. Is there something that you’ve forgotten to say or do that will help.

My experience in those situations is that one looks into the eyes of that student and discovers that they’ve changed and that a relationship that has been defined as teacher and student has become one of friend or colleague. However I hope you’ll forgive me if I the spirit of the academy and as expression of our University’s hopes for you if I try to deliver one piece of advice, something I’ve entitled “One Last Lesson: Challenged to Learn.”

Each of you has overcome significant challenges as you have worked toward this day of achievement. Over the next few moments I’d like you to think consider them while I share with you the college experience of two of your fellow graduates who I met yesterday. This first person never lived on campus, but instead commuted from McBain each day, combining a work schedule of ten-hour days with her study here. Although she never lived or ate on campus, Ferris has left a lasting impression on her. She was a person who was uncertain of what her major should be. As is the case with many students, it was a faculty member who made the difference. Professor Cami Sanderson asked her if she had considered a future in communications. This turned out to be precisely the connection she needed and she graduates with that degree today.
A paper she wrote for Professor Sandy Alspach was accepted for presentation at the National Communication Association conference, a special achievement for an undergraduate. At the conference in Chicago she overcame one last hurdle as the disk with her paper was ruined by the copy shop. Ultimately she did present her paper, “Group Think – NASA’s Weakness,” to this national audience. It is a pleasure to present to you Kellie Brastrom and I would ask that she stand. I believe her family and friends are also here and I would ask that they stand.

This second young lady learned last year that she had been diagnosed with osteosarcoma, commonly known as bone cancer. As she met the challenge of this disease she was forced to leave school as she faced this life threatening struggle. Her treatment included 11 months of chemotherapy and surgery. Through this period her faculty and student colleagues encouraged her. They made coming back to college important. Leah was determined to finish; she knew she wanted to return to a normal life and earning her degree was an important part of this. Beginning first with her exams from last spring, she then enrolled this past semester. Today she proudly graduates with her degree in dental hygiene. The spirit and the courage of this young woman is truly remarkable, it is my honor to introduce to you Leah Quaine.

She is my hero, a person who exemplifies the triumph of the human spirit against extraordinary odds. Leah told me that the combination of positive attitude and support from both family and friends helped sustain her. Her parents, sister, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and boyfriend are here. I’d ask that they stand so we may also recognize them.

On behalf of our University I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment. I would suggest that you consider this simple lesson taught to me this past week. As each of you sets out on the next step on your life and career you will face times of challenge, heartbreak, and disappointment. In those times when you might consider giving up, I’d encourage you to remember the examples of Kellie Brastrom and Leah Quaine and their determination to succeed as students here at Ferris State University.

Congratulations and best wishes.