There is something truly magical about what we witness here today. In the daily experience of college we don’t often have the opportunity to step back and see what our students have become during the course of their studies. Today provides that opportunity when we can pause, reflect and celebrate the truly life-changing difference education can make.

Education is about knowledge, and about people and about life. Education is a calling, something that must be experienced to be appreciated. It is also the story of personal achievement and how talent, hard work, dedication and sacrifice can create remarkable opportunities and overcome formidable challenges. Each of our graduates today has a story. I wish that I could tell you each one, as each is meaningful. However, I would like to share one very special story with you.

This graduate started volunteering at the age of seven in a local nursing home where her mother was employed as a nurse’s aide. Unlike most children her age, she began to see aging and dying as a natural part of life. She says that the greatest reward is knowing that you take the maximum amount of care to make a person physically comfortable and provided for both emotionally and spiritually in their final days. She volunteered for nearly ten years and accumulated more than 2,000 hours in service.

At eight years of age she befriended a woman who was in her early eighties. One day, the woman told our graduate that a man was being mean and rough with her. That same day, she reported the abuse. Thanks to her report, as well as others, the nursing home was charged with abuse and neglect, fined several thousand dollars and eventually resumed operations under new management. These are actions that would be difficult for an adult to undertake, to say nothing of a young child.

This student eventually followed her passion for caregiving, but attending college was not the norm in her family. In fact, today she becomes the first person in her family to earn a college degree, just as she was the first in her family to earn a high school diploma. The hardest thing throughout this student’s life was worrying about having enough food, housing security and her family’s health. In her young life she witnessed drug busts, and several family members have been imprisoned, or otherwise dealt with serious life issues.

Without the expectation of earning a college degree, this student first went to vocational school to learn cosmetology, earned a business certificate, and afterwards worked for two-and-a-half years at a salon in Traverse City.

Coming from an impoverished background, at times she slept on a friend’s couch, in rented basements or hotel rooms, showered at the University Rec Center, and dined on pizza ordered for her by her partner, who lived in Atlanta, Michigan, to make sure that she was eating. Often her only means of staying in touch with her family and her partner was a Tracfone that many times did not have any minutes to its credit. Despite this, she would take 19 to 20 credit hours a semester because, as she puts it, she was “on a mission” to earn her degree.
Today, this student is graduating with her Bachelor of Social Work degree with plans to pursue an advanced degree in social work. She is the recipient of an Ashley Brooks-Danso Memorial Fund Student Travel Scholarship, which provided her with travel expenses and registration to the Council of Social Work’s annual meeting. In his letter of support, Professor Michael Berghoef noted that this student took a study abroad course in El Salvador with the support of another scholarship. She was the only one of his students who volunteered for a gerontological academic service learning placement at a home for homeless elders in San Salvador. Professor Berghoef noted that, “She was a wonderful ambassador for our university, articulate and gracious.”

This graduate wants to stress that importance of the journey which has brought her to this stage today is achieving social mobility and breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Although she felt that sometimes it was a struggle simply to live, she nonetheless maintained a 4.0 grade point average and is looking towards masters and PhD coursework. Remember, this is the first person in her family to earn a high school diploma.

She wants to thank everyone in her Social Work Program, especially professor Berghoef. Joining her today to celebrate her achievement is her partner of five years, Matt Keeton.

It is a pleasure to present to you Charlie Bouverette, and I would ask that she stand and be recognized. Would Matt also stand and be recognized? Graduates, on behalf of our University I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment. As you receive your diploma today I encourage you to reflect upon the education you have received, and the many, many people who helped you arrive at this moment. As you set out on the next step of your life and career, you will face times when you will face difficulties. During those times, think of the example of Charlie Bouverette, who followed her passion for serving others and changing the course of her family’s history, despite challenges that could have discouraged her, but which did not deter her from completing the mission she set for herself.

Congratulations and best wishes, class of 2014!