Good Morning President Lawrence, members of the Board of Trustees, honorary degree recipients, beloved faculty, staff, alumni, family, and friends.

For most of you, orientation consisted of moving into your first year residence hall during hurricane Irene and for a few of us it meant arriving on a cold Friday the 13th – neither one a particularly promising start. Regardless of date and time, I am almost positive that we all had similar gut wrenching concerns. Will I make friends? How’s the food? And why are these annoying people in yellow so loud?

I’ve had the pleasure of being involved in seven orientations during my time at Brandeis, so I figured I pretty much had this “transition thing” figured out. In fact, it wasn’t until about halfway through this year that I had the startling realization that I have no idea what I’m doing. The gut wrenching feeling had returned except, this time, I was wondering if I would get hired, if I would get into law school, and if I would be able to make effective change in the world beyond Brandeis.

This reality is intimidating, but it is familiar. It brings us back to our first day: Saying goodbye to our families, navigating meal plans, and finding classrooms. And it makes me wonder: why is there no orientation for the “real world”?

I have spent years hearing Brandeis Beginning speeches that contained small anecdotes of advice given to first years by our administration. Eventually, I realized that the reason this advice was repeated every semester wasn’t because our administration was recycling speeches, but because the words they were speaking were adaptable to any stage of life. I feel as though it is only appropriate to begin our “real world orientation” with the same four pieces of advice bestowed upon us during our undergraduate orientation.

Every semester, President Lawrence tells the incoming class to look around the auditorium because their future spouse might be in the same room. Now, I’ve mentioned that I have heard this a few times and I can promise you that the reactions are always the same, so before parents start cheering and sending out wedding invites, and before my fellow students boo me off the stage let me just say- this is not a speech about marriage.

President Lawrence spoke of a relationship far greater than marriage and far greater than most of us could conceive at that time. Think about all the people we have met over our years here. The friends we have made, the professors, staff members, and administrators who have changed our lives. I can guarantee that there is at least one person who will be a lifelong influence in each of our journeys. One person who will continue to grow with us, guide us, and share with us. These are the relationships that will change us and shape us into the people we strive to become. A Spanish philosopher said, “To find one good friend in a lifetime is a fortune, to keep him is a blessing”. Think about who those people are in your life and make yourself a promise that you will never let the inconvenience and chaos of whatever lies beyond Brandeis interfere with your relationship with the people you care about most.

The next years of our lives will be challenging, exciting, and terrifying all at the same time. Ellen Sirleaf, the President of Liberia once said, “If your dreams don’t scare you, they aren’t big enough”. Where we sit right now is frightening. For the first time we have been set free and what we do with ourselves is entirely our own choice. But we cannot let our skepticism of the future belittle our dreams. Find something that keeps you up at night and follow it. Do not allow the world, even for a second, to taint or skew your ambitions. People will tell us we “can’t” and it is our job to prove them wrong. President Lawrence usually ends his orientation
address by saying, “If you ever lose confidence in yourself, borrow some of mine”. Some of us will volunteer, some will work, and some will continue their education. We will doubt ourselves and we will wonder if we made the right choices. Often times, we won’t make the right choices, but life is about mistakes. It’s about being so committed to the dream that we are willing to stick our necks out and take the risk. Sometimes we will succeed, and sometimes we will fail. When that time comes, we will have the ability to look back at the Brandeis community we have built and feel the support of our peers and mentors cheering us on.

Speaking of cheering, Dean Adams will, undoubtedly, always be in the back of our minds chanting, “This is our house”. Brandeis is the place where many of us lived away from our families for the first time. Where we made mistakes and learned from them. Where we laughed until we cried and cried until we laughed. It is a breeding ground for advocacy, rallies, and protests. Brandeis is the market place of ideas for young students: A place where people are alike only in their quest to improve the world but unique in their opinions why. A place where the words “social justice” are thrown around as easily as “please” and “thank you”. A place filled with growth, self-care, and betterment. A place where we came into ourselves, often times, without even realizing we had to. A place where… we will soon be leaving.

Brandeis will always be our home. And although some may argue that our Brandeis experience is ending, I beg to differ that it is just beginning. What we do beyond these walls will define our four years here. Taking the wisdom and lessons we have been given and spreading them to the people and places of our future is where the real Brandeis experience begins. Realizing that Brandeis should not be unique because of its commitment to social justice, and bringing that social mindedness to the communities we inhabit is the most honorable thing we can do with our diplomas.

Senior Vice President Flagel said, “With great power comes great responsibility”. Brandeis did not prepare us for the world. Brandeis prepared us to change the world. It is now our responsibility to do it. It is our responsibility to make sure that there is clean air for our children to breathe, that every student has access to education, that laws are created and upheld equally, that inventions continue to better our medical field, and that people of all races, religions, and genders feel safe walking home. It is our responsibility to take hold of what we do not like and peacefully create a world that makes us proud of humanity, to end nuclear warfare, the war on drugs and the war on skin color. We can do it. And if you doubt that, then we are all out of luck, because I promise there is no one more qualified to change the world than the sea of people I’m looking at right now. This is not an option, it is not a possibility, it is a responsibility. We must and we will. Do not tread lightly on your ambitions for this next chapter in your life. Do not accept “no”, do not be pushed to the bottom of the pile, do not let your passions be placed on the back burner. We have a responsibility to take everything we have learned and observed here and use it to make changes in our communities. Brandeis is counting on us. Our families are counting on us. And the world is counting on us.

To the class of 2015, as indicated by the embarrassing pictures on our ID cards, we have come a long way since our orientation. It has been a pleasure growing with you and I cannot wait to return to reunions and bask in the glow of your accomplishments, successes, and happiness.

Underclassmen who are here today, we pass the torch to you. Treat this place well. Continue learning, challenging, and exploring. Make the most of your time at Brandeis because we can promise you, it goes by much faster than you think. Take care of your house, and take care of our home.

Thank You