“Everything I needed to know about politics, I learned by living on an island”

Thank you so much for including me on your special day. It is an honor for me to be here and I want you to know I am a very big fan of UNE, your administrators and staff, and, of course, all of you, the wonderful graduating students. Some of you have been to visit me in my office in Washington or Portland and we have had the opportunity to discuss everything from the challenges of expanding the physical facilities at UNE to the future of health care reform through the eyes of medical students and your instructors.

It is so impressive to see a list showing the diversity of the graduates and the many careers you will be taking on – from physician to social worker to athletic trainer to biologist and groundfish observer. Some of you grew up in Maine and we are happy you have chosen to receive your education in Maine. Others of you have come here from almost every state, and from countries as near as Canada and as distant as Mongolia. We have been proud to have you study here in Maine – you have enriched us all and we hope many of you chose to stay, become a long term part of our communities, raise your families and work your career in Maine. You will forever be valued and appreciated by all of us.

I want to thank you for honoring me with an advanced degree. I will display it proudly. I am very excited by how quickly I was able to acquire this degree. As far as I can tell, I was granted this for delivering a 10 minute speech, and – to be honest – it took me about 6 years to finish my undergraduate degree. Life is truly speeding up.

Perhaps there are a few who have had a similar college timeline. My college career had a little interruption named Hannah, my first daughter. I was studying Human Ecology and organic farming at College of the Atlantic. When Hannah was born, we moved to the island of North Haven – about 75 miles north of here. That island has been my home for the past 40 years – there I have been a mom, a farmer, owned more than one small
business and been a politician doing everything from chairing the local school board to now serving as a Member of congress – representing Camden to Kittery, including your college. The island has been the source of most of my life lessons and teachings—in fact, I think everything I needed to know about politics, I learned by living on an island. This morning, I want a share a few with you as you are heading to the next stage of your life with a new degree in your hand.

Some life lessons are so simple, but they can make a big difference:

**Never pass up a chance for a good conversation.** Living on an island necessitates an hour-long ride on a ferry to get to and from the “mainland,” as we call it. I have been finding a seat in that boat for over 40 years, never quite knowing who I would sit next to – friend or foe. More than once I have been so glad that it was a neighbor I never spoke to enough or a rarely seen older person perhaps headed to the dentist and taking the hour long ride. In conversations I didn’t expect, I have learned about the history, gotten good book suggestions, or laid the ground work for a future business collaboration. There is never anyone who isn’t worthy of your conversation and doesn’t have wisdom to impart – it is the simplest and most humbling form of education.

**Do your best to never leave conflicts unresolved;** you will always regret it later (I wish more of my colleagues in Washington would practice this). In our town we govern through our annual “town meeting.” For you government and political science majors, this is one of the most traditional and purest form of government and still the governing practice of many rural towns in New England. For us it occurs on the second Saturday in March, and there are always homemade donuts and coffee in the morning and a delicious bean lunch half-way through the day. We vote on every item that will be included in our annual budget and elect the politicians that will govern us for the coming year – from the Board of selectmen to the Recreation council. It can get heated, downright “ugly” as we say in Maine, when people disagree on anything from how well the road commissioner did plowing the snow and ice the past winter to whether the taxes should be raised to replace a wing of the school. When people have a say over their own governing the debates can be fierce – but in the end there is a vote, we make a decision and move on to the next item. There have been a few big fights and the divide lasted more than a month or two, but in the end, we are all reminded that you can’t fight too long with the plumber if you need him
to fix your frozen water pipes, or stay angry at the parents of your daughter’s best friends, if she wants to have a play date. In the end every conflict has to come to an end if we’re all going to see each other every day.

Speaking of town meeting, one of the important decisions we make every year is about health care, and since so many of you are future medical practitioners, I want to explain to you how I came to believe that everyone was entitled to universal access to care – and that the government should play a role – through my experiences of living on an island of 350 people.

Because we are such a small town, it would be very difficult for a medical practitioner – physician, nurse practitioner or PA – to set up a practice with so few patients and make it pay. On the other hand, for generations, people have known that they don’t want to take the risk of living in a community where there is no medical care. Being an hour away by ferry to the nearest hospital or clinic means that a local full-time physician (currently we’re served by a PA) is critical to our community’s survival. So, we provide a doctor or other practitioner with a subsidy to make sure they can afford to stay (and in today’s world, pay off their college loans).

So every year, part of our annual votes include the amount of the doctor’s salary as well as any maintenance or improvements to the clinic or Doctor’s house. And, in fact, we add in a little extra to make sure that if someone comes to the clinic in need of help but doesn’t have insurance or can’t afford to pay, their care is covered as well. Here we are, in a town first settled in the 1700’s, historically a Republican community of fishermen and farmers who operate a system of “socialized medicine,” virtually always have – and wouldn’t have it any other way.

I see a lot of similarities when it comes to how I have observed the islander’s treatment of our natural environment and there are lessons to be learned here as well. In the political world, I often see people portray the agencies that make environmental laws as evil doers who just want to cause us all pain. But I would say, I have observed our community’s relationship to the environment as anything but adversarial but with a true understanding of how that relationship is critical to our survival. We are situated on a piece of land only 3 miles wide by 11 miles long – and people know all too well that we wouldn’t survive without an abundant supply of fresh water, so a couple of decades ago we stopped dumping our trash where it might interfere with the quality of our ground water, and restricted swimming and
boating on our small fresh water pond. And no one knows better than our fishermen that if a pollutant travels from land into the ocean it could have a serious impact on our lobsters and clams, so we long ago pooled our resources and built a plant to treat our sewage – rather than risk the loss of our livelihood.

The school is the heart of our community and a constant reminder to me of the importance that everyone has access to a free, public education. We are vigilant about keeping our school open – even though we have the smallest high school graduating class in the state – knowing that if every young person doesn’t have a good start in life, what kind of neighbors and co-workers will we have in the future to sustain a healthy way of life.

Some of our young people move on to find interesting careers in other communities, but a surprising number come back – and work at a variety of jobs from fishermen to plumbers, teachers to shopkeepers and some get creative and use the island as a base for writing, filmmaking or painting or boatbuilding. Watching our young people move back home – because they want to live in a community where people care about each other and keep an eye on each other, young and old, has taught me the greatest life lesson of all – if you can’t live and work in a community – whether it is a small isolated town like mine, a neighborhood of a big city, or if you view your community as our entire state or country – if we don’t believe that we are all in this together and we have to keep our focus on what is good for everyone, then life has little meaning and our culture has little purpose or soul.

I wish for all of you an opportunity to take what you have learned and be a part of a community, to do productive work that supports your friends and neighbors and allows you the satisfaction of being a part of sharing in a good life and a promising future with others.

I know you’ve all gotten a great education, and learned in a wonderful community. And, while we all know that there will be challenges and obstacles ahead, you could have had no better preparation in no better place and today, you are in a room full of people who are going to keep pulling for you and cheering your success for a long time to come. All the best!