Greetings, SPCS Class of 2020. I am delighted to have this opportunity to address you and your family and friends — and would like to wish those of you who are mothers, a happy Mother’s Day weekend.

For 42 straight years, I have never missed participating in May commencement exercises — save one exception.

As an educator, it has been one of the great joys of my life, watching students grow and develop over the course of their educational careers — and then celebrating their remarkable achievements alongside family and friends, as they commence the next phase of their lives.

SPCS Class of 2020 — I am certain you never imagined celebrating this major accomplishment quite in this way. But amid this public health crisis, I can’t say I’m surprised that you have once again proven yourselves uniquely qualified to juggle multiple responsibilities – and to meet any challenge that comes your way.

The SPCS faculty and staff, and Dean Wilson and I, could not be prouder of you — or more pleased to celebrate this milestone with you.

I’d especially like to acknowledge your family and friends who are watching today. They have made extraordinary sacrifices over many years leading up to this moment, and this is a very important moment for them, too. So please thank them for accompanying you on your academic journey.

Graduates, we pledge to host a fitting tribute to you on campus once it is safe to do so, celebrating your achievements; toasting your friendships; and thanking the SPCS faculty and staff and your family and friends.

For commencement is an important rite of passage you have earned and deserve, at once providing closure to your SPCS education — and symbolizing the beginning of the next stage of your lives of purpose, wherever you may find your purpose in the world.

But for now, as we all work to navigate this difficult time, I would like to share something the artist Georgia O'Keeffe once said, that has helped me to persevere in the face of adversity. I quote:

“I’ve been absolutely terrified every moment of my life – and I’ve never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.”

Graduates – you are taking the next step in your lives at a time of great uncertainty in our society; and that can be frightening and even overwhelming at times.

And yet, I have every confidence in your ability to meet this moment with courage and compassion, using it as a catalyst to create more good in the world and ultimately to accomplish everything you have set out to do.

I believe in you, not only because SPCS has prepared you to be lifelong learners, committed to excellence, innovation, and integrity; but also because you have already demonstrated the remarkable inner strength and generosity of spirit that are hallmarks of a Richmond education.

For you have successfully completed an unexpected semester of remote learning, while experiencing the isolation of social distancing and — in some cases — working remotely, or caring for family members who have fallen ill.

You have shown that even when our web is stretched wider than perhaps ever before, it will not break but expand.

Graduates — the University shares my great pride in your accomplishments and resilience.

We enthusiastically welcome your frequent return to campus, where you will always have a home.

And, as I have said before, we will always remember you as a special class in SPCS’s history, known for your grit and ability to weather difficult circumstances — the exact type of people I want by my side when the storm comes.

This is not the end of your story, SPCS Class of 2020. As a musician, I continue to think of this moment as a fermata — an unexpected pause before the music continues. And it most certainly will.

Thank you, and congratulations!