

Helen Hanna Casey '71
GCU Undergraduate Commencement Ceremony
May 20, 2011

Good afternoon Sister Rosemary, distinguished faculty, trustees, family, friends, and, most importantly, the 2011 graduating class of Georgian Court University.

Let me begin by thanking the Board of Trustees for this incredible honor. On occasions like this; it is usually appropriate to say that one doesn't truly deserve this honor, but actually during the 40 years since I graduated from Georgian Court, like many of my fellow graduates, I have earned my stripes from hard work and commitment to what I do. Each day has been a business class in itself. I have attended meetings and lectures with mentors and motivators, taken countless "final" exams, written way too many business plans and theses. And if you ask those with whom I work every day, I give way too many "dissertations."

Is there extra credit for being a mother and doing the laundry in the middle of the night? How many credit hours do we get for walking into a meeting with all men or from baking cookies, driving car pools, and still getting to work on time? Somehow I know that academic bodies must recognize what it means to keep your cool when a male colleague says, "Don't worry your pretty little head about this, honey." How does one measure the precious time spent being a parent, child, wife, mentor, friend, and a boss? What is the credit for the pain of loss or the joy of success? In 1967, Georgian Court didn't offer classes in financial planning—they didn't offer accounting, but somehow we learned to balance our home budgets and developed an understanding of financial statements. We became educators, scientists, accountants, bankers, lawyers, and even Realtors while still doing dishes and going to the grocery store.

For women of my generation, this was our world. Our credits have been measured not in hours, but in four decades of everyday living, so I am pleased to accept this on behalf of the entire Class of 1971.

We might not have known what was ahead, but we were able to build upon the foundation of critical thinking and self assurance that were instilled in us by the Sisters of Mercy. We are the product of our family, our faith, our friends, and our education.

That being said, I am terrified to be giving the Commencement speech to the leaders of the next generation of Georgian Court graduates.

Many weeks ago, when I began to write this speech, I wondered: what could I say, what should I talk about? So I started taking the most obvious route and gathered opinions from my friends; they said be short, be simple, be funny, be memorable. Students told me to be positive, tell us it's okay to make mistakes. People tell me they cannot remember anything from their Commencement address, and others who claim to remember every word that was spoken. So I wrote page after page of notes. This was worse than writing a term paper on Russian history at Georgian Court in 1970. I know that all great Commencement speeches have had similar themes of hard work, dedication to a mission, and a passion for everything you do each day. How could I talk about the past, the present, and the future that is ahead for you to create? I wanted to reflect on those things that made us what we are today.

The Georgian Court that we see today appears, at first glance, to be very different than it was when I arrived 44 years ago. There were no computers or solar panels or even blow dryers. We couldn't have imagined the incredible new Wellness Center; we couldn't wear shorts or pants on campus. I am not even sure how we would have handled seeing men every day. It would have required us to get up early to put on makeup. Yet, the important things remain the same. Georgian Court continues to be a beacon for growth and opportunity. The Court still guides its students in their search of enlightenment and still challenges all to explore and develop self- intellect and self-awareness. The stately pines still tower the expanded, but still magnificent campus. The gardens still provide quiet spots for contemplation and study, and Apollo hasn't moved an inch.

Since I have been part of the Mercy tradition for so long, I wanted to share with you what makes your Georgian Court education so special. I could fill the allotted time with nothing but Mercy stories, but then I realized that you, as students, have lived the Mercy mission every day. Respect, integrity, justice, compassion, and service are not just words—they are the core of how we live our lives. Today, more than ever, the world needs and demands us to practice the values that have been instilled in all of us. I already know you will continue your mission as you move on in life. You will make a difference—you **can** make a difference—in all the lives you touch.

My life is so immersed in family that I felt I needed to reflect on how important your families have been to your present success. As someone who works with my father, sister, brother, daughter, nieces, and nephews daily, I am blessed to have the loving arms of my husband and my family to guide and support me. But I wouldn't be telling you something you should not already know. Your own family and friends would be with you today to celebrate as they have been with you each day of your academic career to encourage and support you. Without family and friends, our journey would be without meaning, without cause. They all deserve a round of applause.

Of course, I would need to talk about the Georgian Court faculty. These outstanding educators have the ability to care and share at the same time. They have nurtured and guided you to help you to achieve your potential. Their commitment is undeniable in helping you to shape your future. They deserve a standing ovation.

How could I include all this in a Commencement speech? How could I keep it short, funny, and inspiring? So I took my husband's advice. Since he is always trying to make my life easier, he told me to talk about something I know well. Since I consider myself to be an expert on shoes, I was on my way. I love my shoes. I am so close to them that I never leave home without a pair or two. Now I know you are all wondering, "What is she talking about?"—but bear with me a moment.

I must tell you that I am as passionate about my shoes as I am about my work. I realize that this is not necessarily a "guy thing," but everyone wears shoes.

Work and shoes are both passions I developed at Georgian Court. Just take a moment and reflect on the shoes you are wearing and why you chose them. You might have selected them for comfort, color, or style. Perhaps you wanted to appear taller or shorter. Whatever the reason, each of you made a decision that would affect the rest of your day. We don't often reflect on what we do at the beginning of our day, in what we accomplish in our lives, but it's the small choices that lead us to the big decisions.

From the moment you wake each day, you determine your destiny. If I get up and don't put on my gym shoes, I don't work out or run, and I don't regain that time. Is it the shoes that make us run or is it what they represent? Think about the days you are just going to run to the store in any old

shoes; suddenly, what you run into is an opportunity. It could be someone or something that will make a difference for a day, or it may change your life. We always lead with our feet. Just think about how you get out of bed, enter a room, and get to the end of the road. Each day, each choice has consequences. There are days when you will choose very carefully, you will plan and execute, but suddenly, there is an unforeseen crack in the road; you may break a heel or be at a crossroad. Will you turn back, stay stuck where you are, or force yourself to move ahead? Will you have the guts to change shoes, change your life, in mid-step? Will you have a backup pair? It's up to you to make the choice.

There was a time when a woman had very few pairs of shoes to choose from. Some even believed in Cinderella. They waited for their fairy godmother to give them glass slippers to lead them to their destiny, and then waited for Prince Charming to make the glass slipper fit. Unfortunately, many of us know that our prince doesn't make us fit—it's our responsibility to find our niche. Today, it's your goal to conceive, design, create, and wear the shoes you choose. You must step out into the world and search for the right fit. I can vividly remember moving into St. Joe's and carrying my shoe boxes to the second floor. I probably had about 10 pair, each box properly marked. Each pair had a purpose. Tennis shoes (we really did wear them just for tennis); penny loafers for class; pumps for Court functions, dances, and dates; and cute little flats to match our cute little skirts and sweaters. That was 1967.

Between 1967 and 1971, the world changed dramatically. Suddenly, we were faced with issues and decisions we couldn't have conceived of when we started, and we needed to make individual choices. We were in a terrible war in a jungle, and we lived through civil unrest on the streets and on campuses throughout the country. There were organizations and movements everywhere. Civil rights, women's rights, the SDS, the Black Panthers, NOW, hippies, and Hare Krishna sought our involvement. A new world order and an abundance of choices surrounded us. Suddenly, you could wear any shoes you wanted anytime. Woodstock even taught us it was okay to go barefoot. Sandals, platforms, work boots, and more; infinite numbers of choices and decisions. Fortunately, Georgian Court had given us the tools to help guide us in the right direction. We knew which shoes to wear, where to wear them, and which roads to try until we found our way.

But, as Bob Dylan says, "Don't look back." Today's generation faces turmoil at home and abroad with so many decisions to be made, but we all chose well when we chose Georgian Court. You may stumble or even fall, but you have what you need to set you straight. You are graduates of Georgian Court University. So pick your shoes well, be sure those shoes fit, and then run into the wonderful future that lies ahead.

But after the cheers, the hugs, and the tears, before you leave campus today, join me as we put our best foot forward and walk to the nearest stately pine and remember "with honor and loyalty, faith, staunch and true, we pledge fidelity and love to our families, our friends, and dear Georgian Court, but most especially to ourselves!"

See you in 2051 when it's your turn to give the Commencement address!