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Rivier graduates hear of 'sweet possibilities' in life

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Speaking during the Rivier University commencement Saturday morning, Daniel Thomas Varela reminded his fellow graduates that their alma mater's mission of "transforming hearts and minds to serve the world" is no longer simply a quote on paper or an abstract ideal.

With the completion of their studies, the mission statement now represents a celebration of the beginning of their lives as teachers, nurses and other professionals eager to sharpen their skills and create a difference in the world, said Varela, who graduated magna cum laude in the education field.

"Today, we toss a pebble into the pond. The ripples of this (small) stone will have far-reaching positive effects, the likes of which we can only imagine," he said during a brief speech at the Tsongas Center in Lowell, Mass., just a short drive from the main campus in Nashua.

A total of 799 students graduated during the 80th commencement ceremony for Rivier University. Among those receiving an undergraduate degree was Merrimack resident Mackenna Murtagh, who earned his degree in psychology and was presented with the Dr. Jamison Gilder Hoff Leadership Medal.

But Murtagh isn't going far – he will remain in Rivier for its graduate programs, work part-time and serve as a volunteer EMT. He cherishes the strong friendships and connections he has made during his tenure.

"They don't lose me just yet," he said with a smile. "I've met some really unbelievable people, and I'm going to miss them. Hopefully, we stay in touch. The education has just been outstanding."

Mikayla L. Ahern, a Nashua resident, graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in human development/general special education/early childhood education. She was one of the first students to enter the arena and had the honor of carrying the New Hampshire flag.

"I transferred into Rivier, so I only had two years there, but they gave me a lot of classes and a lot of field experience, which is important because my confidence grew a lot since I started," she said. "My dream is to get a job somewhere in the field and help make a difference in a child's life and try to push myself past what just the basic teacher does."

Hollis resident Emily Rose Doran, who received her Bachelor of Science degree in nursing Saturday, has followed in the footsteps of her mother, who also graduated from the Rivier

program. She will pursue her master's degree while working at Lahey Hospital & Medical Center in nearby Burlington, Mass.

Both Doran and fellow nursing student Sarah Madeline Saurman, of Pelham, credit the university for giving them a jumpstart in their careers. Saurman said she was able to start working in her senior year and, despite the challenging nature of the program, came out as a confident nurse.

"I'm very thankful for Rivier for that," she said.

The keynote speech to the graduates was given by nursing leader and safety advocate Dr. Karen Daley, who overcame adversity as a young child in an alcoholic family and later in the workplace when she was infected with HIV and Hepatitis C by a needlestick in 1998.

In the past 17 years, she has made a career of preaching prevention and has pushed for legislation mandating the use of safer needle in the medical industry. Her efforts have been recognized and Daley has been named one of the top and most influential people in health care.

Daley, who served at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston for a quarter century and later as president of the American Nurses Association, was presented a doctorate of humane letters in recognition of her career as a nurse, public health advocate, and educator.

"There is no more satisfying way to live life than at the service of others," she said.

While addressing her own insecurities and discovering how she could excel in her personal and professional life, she called upon the students to find out more about what challenges them and brings joy within their own experiences.

She told them to have the courage to fall flat and not to fear failure – "It's one of the ways we learn best as human beings" – and to gamble on themselves, citing the time she was asked to take the helm at the 1.3 million member nursing association. She said it was the best job for her because of the challenges within the office.

"Looking back today, I'm so glad I took the risk," she said. "To be willing to risk both failure and success, that is where you find the sweetest possibilities in life."

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