

# Mount Holyoke grads receive presidential send off

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Monday, May 25, 2009

**SOUTH HADLEY** - In the words of Ireland's eighth president Mary McAleese on Sunday, "Tus maith is leath na hoibre."

The Irish proverb translates to "a good start is half the work."

"Here at Mount Holyoke College, you've got a good start," McAleese said to Mount Holyoke graduates and a crowd of about 4,000 at the college's 172nd commencement.

"You've given your very best here. You've been tested. You've been challenged. You know yourself a lot better now..."

However, she said, there is plenty of work ahead - especially in the advancement of women, who, in most parts of the world, are still regarded as "second class" and "second best."

Nearly 600 women in caps and gowns sat in front of McAleese as she spoke on the Gettell Amphitheater stage. Graduates fanned themselves with their programs and drank from the water bottles that were placed on their seats Sunday, a sun-filled 80-degree day.

The realities McAleese addressed weren't as bright as the outdoor ceremony: The United Nations predicts 22 million women will become unemployed worldwide in 2009; in less than one in 10 sexual-violence cases is the perpetrator charged; and two-thirds of the illiterate people in the world are women, which McAleese said is not only a loss to the country where women are held back, but "to the individual whose life is only half-lived."

On the other hand, attitudes and cultures change, McAleese said. The peace process in Ireland, though "far from complete," illustrates a people's ability to create new meanings, she added.

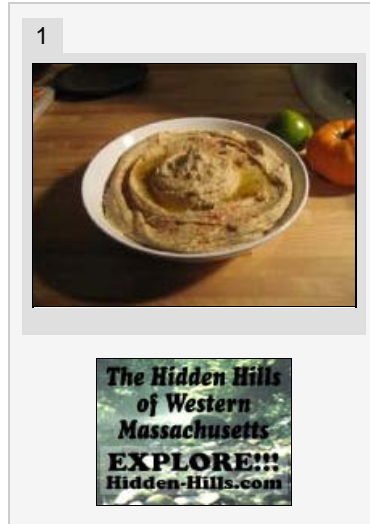
"The things you see as obstacles you can change because people can change," McAleese said.

Echoing the agenda set by Mount Holyoke's founder Mary Lyon, McAleese asked graduates to "go where no one else will go and do what no one else will do."

The school community seemed to receive her message well.

"She has been fighting for rights that this campus holds completely central to our ideals," said Rebeca Echevarria, a Mount Holyoke junior from Philadelphia.

Clarity Guerra, of Los Angeles, said McAleese is a role model for her classmates. Perhaps a member from the 2009 Mount Holyoke class will walk in the Irish president's footsteps, becoming the first woman president in the United States, Guerra said.



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"She showed us the importance of each individual standing out in the world to make a change," said Bernardita Bettancourt, an international student from Chile who received a certificate in psychology administration. "It's a powerful message for us to go out and seek."

An honorary degree recipient Sunday for a doctorate in law, McAleese said the first time she announced she wanted to be a lawyer more than 40 years ago, her priest replied "you can't because you are a woman." McAleese, who was a teenager at the time, listened to her mother's feedback and refused to hear the priest's message.

"It was the only career advice I got from my mother," McAleese said.

A couple of years later - the same year the first human walked on the moon - McAleese opened "Learning the Law," a text book she was assigned to read in law school.

The author, professor Glanville Williams, maintained law school was no place for women because their voices were too weak in the courtroom, and the only gain a female law student could make is the opportunity to meet a suitable spouse.

"I got my retaliation by marrying a dentist," McAleese said smiling. She noted Williams "wouldn't have a job today" with Equal Opportunity Employer laws, which drew laughs from the audience.

McAleese called on graduates to dwell in their possibilities. The world has tried to fly on one wing - the wing of a man - for centuries, but, as the Irish saying goes, "two shortens the journey." In other words, a bird flying with two wings has a better chance of getting somewhere than a bird flying with one wing.

A good start is only half the work, she reiterated.

"May the best still be yet to come through your unique genius," McAleese said.

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