

“Our Berea” Convocation

Thursday, August 29, 2019

Introduction

Good Afternoon, Berea! I am Ashley Seals, and I have been chosen as the alumni speaker to tell my Berea story. Let me begin by sincerely thanking President Roelofs for this opportunity to share my Berea Story with you today. I tell everyone that I am the poster child for Berea College. I come from a hard working family. My parents just could not afford to send me to college. Berea allowed me opportunities and experiences that I would not have had the privilege to have. Therefore, today I am full of pride and feel honored to represent Berea alumni in this capacity.

My Berea Story

I found Berea at a challenging time in my life. I had just graduated from high school and was working three jobs. My guidance counselor in high school didn't take any time with me because I was a “skirt girl.” I actively pursued information about going to college but she still assumed that I would marry after high school. You see, exclusion comes in different forms throughout our lives. This time I was excluded because of my religion. Looking back it made me push myself harder to prove to them that I was more than a stereotype. Because of a favor from a local principal I ended up at a local university. So here I was at a University that I could not afford, working hard to make it work. After my first semester I was told to pay my last semesters bill or I would not be welcome to return. I was heartbroken. I had always been taught that if you work hard and do right, things work out. I came home from work that evening and sit next to my dad. I leaned on him for a minute and then began to explain what the university had told me. I will never forget his face. He told me that he was sorry that he was not able to send me to college and that he had failed me. “Failed me?” This was the man that was gone to work before school each morning and rarely home before dark each night. A man that I watched make sacrifices for his family my entire life. He had not failed me!

So I decided to make a call to the man that had recruited my sister to Berea College, Lynn Murphy. Lynn was a special person. Those of us that had the pleasure of knowing him knew that he had a heart for his students. Lynn met me on my break at work. He sat in the lobby of the bank and listened to my story. I didn't hold anything back. I told him about my dad, about my jobs, and my aspirations. I explained to him my last semester didn't reflect my best work, because I had no time to concentrate on my classes. After I was finished he looked at me and

said “you are Berea material.” He didn’t make promises but he told me that he would fight for me. Five days later I received my acceptance letter; I cried.

Berea Beloved

I was determined not to let him down. I worked hard for my B average (yes, I’m saying B .001 doesn’t count) I joined Al White and the Berea College Bluegrass Band and traveled to Japan and Ireland. I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Richard Cahill whom I begged to take me to Egypt. I signed up to learn language and architecture but ended up learning more about the world and it’s people than I ever could have hoped for. (for the record Nashwa Cahill let me know that I was a sweet girl but I probably wasn’t going to be a dancer) Despite the dozens of worries that I had about leaving the Country this little Holiness girl from Southwest Virginia who was supposed to only marry after high school was an international traveller. That’s the great thing about Berea, there is a lessons within these experiences. It isn’t just a Western Traditions class, it is a class full of people you didn’t know from places you have never heard of. My spirit thrived on these experiences and these people; the diversity of the campus and the unforgettable opportunities of travel.

A Word of Advice

1. Travel! For the love of Jesus, Travel! You will learn more than you could ever have imagined. It will force you to think outside your box.
2. Be sure your advisor knows your heart! By your heart, I mean what makes you, you! God love, Dr. Chad Berry! I must have talked to him a dozen times about a major. Finally he said “Ashley! What do you love?” (ends up I love my Momma, mountain music, mountain food, mountain culture)
3. Enjoy the diversity! Talk to each other and learn from each other!