

00:06
- All right, I'm gonna take off my dress mask,
00:07
which I wore for y'all today.
00:09
It's its third outing.
00:10
One for each vaccination,
00:12
and one to celebrate you all.
00:17
You can clap for that, you can clap for vaccinations.
00:20
(audience applauding)
00:21
(Karen laughs)
00:23
Oh, man, thank you, Dean Zeng and trustees
00:25
for the invitation to come back to my alma mater
00:28
and be part of this historic graduation.
00:30
And I mean, wow, what a view.
00:35
As an undergrad alumna of Suffolk University,
00:37
I have a deep gratitude and love for the school.
00:41
I have many fond memories of the people I met,
00:45
those who taught me, and the overall experience
00:48
of being a wide-eyed undergrad in Boston.
00:53
Suffolk gave me the foundational education
00:56
and the flexibility I needed
00:58
to develop personally and professionally.
01:01
It helped shape me for a life
01:04
of giving back to the community,
01:07
not only through medicine,
01:09
but also through efforts to achieve equity.
01:14
We are in this historic place today for graduation
01:17
because of this historic COVID-19 pandemic.
01:21
I want to take a moment to acknowledge
01:23
that everyone has been impacted in significant ways.
01:27
Some people in communities disproportionately,
01:31
it's been extremely disruptive in all facets of life,
01:34

education, work, and our personal lives.
01:39
But one thing I have learned in life
01:41
is even the most catastrophic disruption
01:45
can bring opportunity,
01:48
opportunity to make lasting and meaningful change,
01:52
change that can improve the quality of life for everyone.
01:57
The pandemic has impacted every sector of the economy,
02:02
leading to not only disruption, but also reflection,
02:06
about what a return to the new normal will look like.
02:11
From learning to work remotely to leveraging digital tools,
02:16
so much has radically changed in the world.
02:20
Watching the innovation emerging from this crisis
02:23
is a reminder to all of us
02:24
that from tragedy can come opportunity,
02:28
and not just new business or care models,
02:31
but opportunities to reimagine.
02:34
I anticipate that coming out of this pandemic,
02:36
we will and should take advantage of what we've learned
02:40
to make positive changes across many sectors.
02:44
This pandemic hasn't just made everyone
02:46
an amateur epidemiologist.
02:49
It's pulled back the curtain on a host of inequities
02:52
in our health, social, and financial systems,
02:57
inequities that warrant systemic improvements.
03:01
We have also learned that as the community goes,
03:04
so too, we as individuals and organizations go.
03:07
We are all interconnected.
03:11
Graduates, you are now among the elite.
03:14
Only about a third of the U.S. population
03:16
attains a college degree.
03:18
It puts you in a very privileged position.

03:22
And I firmly believe that with privilege
03:25
comes responsibility.
03:27
Yes, you should use your Suffolk education
03:29
to make a better life for yourself,
03:32
but I also hope that along the way,
03:35
you use it to help others make a better life for themselves.
03:39
It will bring a different kind of reward,
03:43
one that I have found to be meaningful and lasting,
03:46
more than any other.
03:48
Especially after the challenges of the pandemic,
03:50
many of us have discovered that helping others,
03:52
and allowing others to help us,
03:55
can be hugely impactful and empowering.
03:59
My own life has been quite full of this kind of reward.
04:02
Throughout my career, I've been blessed
04:04
with opportunities to support others,
04:06
partner with great minds,
04:08
and scale solutions that address
04:10
some of the biggest problems and inequities we face,
04:15
including this past year at Google,
04:16
where we worked hard to amplify
04:18
the important messages of public health,
04:22
to see that people get the right information
04:24
at the right time to save lives.
04:27
I love being part of Google,
04:29
because it's a place that believes in partnering for good,
04:33
and that approach has helped us make
04:35
a real difference throughout the pandemic.
04:38
Millions of people around the world come to Google every day
04:42
on Search, Maps, and YouTube,
04:44

to find out about health information.
04:47
And COVID-19 massively multiplied those queries.
04:52
The scale still astounds me.
04:54
On YouTube, for example,
04:55
our public health messages pointing people
04:58
to the World Health Organization
04:59
had 500 billion impressions.
05:04
So far, we've invested nearly \$1 billion
05:06
to help end the pandemic.
05:08
We're currently very focused on COVID-19 vaccinations,
05:12
using tools such as ads grants
05:14
and directly funding community-based organizations
05:17
to help high-risk populations get vaccinated.
05:21
It's been a meaningful time to be at Google doing this work.
05:26
For me, it comes down to uniting my vocation
05:28
with my avocation to fight inequities,
05:32
a mission that's especially urgent
05:34
during moments of crisis like this,
05:36
when the world shifts and we have opportunities
05:39
to build movements that drive lasting change.
05:42
Engaged citizenship aimed at giving back
05:44
has been a common theme throughout my career,
05:47
from caring for patients as a doctor,
05:49
teaching medical students, and to public service.
05:52
It's all about what we do for our community
05:55
to pay forward what we have received.
06:00
Suffolk strengthened this ethos in me.
06:02
It's a place where students with modest roots
06:05
and remarkable potential can reach for the stars.
06:09
Hard work met with strong mentorship
06:10
can make a world of difference.

06:14

That's my story.

06:15

I came from humble beginnings,

06:17

raised by a single mother below the poverty level,

06:20

literally grew up on a dirt road in Texas.

06:24

Mama taught us that education was our ticket out of poverty.

06:28

And she also made sure we knew

06:30

that even though we were disadvantaged,

06:32

there was always someone who needed help more than we did.

06:37

She lived those words and somehow found time to volunteer,

06:42

even if she went without sleep, made other sacrifices,

06:46

all while raising me and my two sisters alone.

06:50

She was a wonderful role model,

06:52

reminding me by her actions that giving back

06:55

is core to our humanity.

06:59

When it came time for college,

07:00

I knew that I wanted to be a doctor,

07:02

but as the first person in my family to go into medicine,

07:06

I had really no idea about the path to get there.

07:10

All I had for reference was a medical TV show

07:14

called "St. Elsewhere," which was set here in Boston.

07:18

(Karen chuckles)

07:19

So I thought, well, I'm gonna go to Boston,

07:21

because that's where doctors are made.

07:24

I was that naive, but it turns out,

07:26

my instincts were spot on.

07:28

I made my way to Boston, and in fact,

07:30

it was my first plane flight ever.

07:32

I arrived without a clear plan for college,

07:35

but I had to pay the bills and was fortunate

07:38

to get a job with the state in the McCormack Building

07:41

on Beacon Hill right across the street from Suffolk.
07:45
One of my colleagues was a Suffolk student,
07:47
and she encouraged me to enroll.
07:50
I did, and that was a life-altering choice.
07:54
Suffolk was the perfect school for me.
07:57
The university and faculty understood about working students
08:02
and gave me the flexibility I needed to thrive in my studies
08:06
and survive in the world.
08:09
Suffolk also offered a wonderful intercultural experience.
08:14
Having barely ventured outside of Texas as a kid,
08:17
it was my first chance to meet people
08:19
who were first-generation
08:21
and people from all over the world.
08:24
The experience opened my eyes to the power of diversity,
08:28
and how exposure to different life experiences
08:31
and perspectives can help us ask better questions
08:35
and find better answers to complex global problems.
08:39
It seems like as Sawyer students,
08:41
you've had the same experience many decades later.
08:45
Though a lot of you are from around here,
08:46
many of you and your faculty are from all over the world.
08:50
And that's by design.
08:52
Dean Zeng shared with me that Sawyer
08:53
values cultural awareness because of the powerful impact
08:57
it can have on future leaders like you.
09:01
That diversity is what differentiates
09:03
Suffolk students in the classroom
09:05
and Sawyer alumni in the boardroom.
09:09
The increasingly global nature of business
09:11
requires that the leaders of tomorrow
09:13
integrate a range of perspectives and life experiences

09:17
into their decision-making.

09:19
And that diversity of thought enables business leaders

09:22
to view their work as a vehicle

09:24
for not only growing our economy,

09:27
but also for advancing equity in our society.

09:31
That relationship between diversity,

09:33
equity, and public service

09:35
is something I care deeply about.

09:39
In my industry of healthcare, the evidence is unequivocal.

09:42
Inequities in access, quality, and outcomes

09:45
are the primary barriers to achieving

09:48
meaningful improvements in well-being,

09:51
prosperity, and longevity.

09:54
COVID-19 is the latest reminder of this profound truth.

10:00
My heart aches for those in places

10:03
like India and Latin America,

10:05
who are struggling under the weight of COVID-19,

10:08
where gaps in vaccine access and health infrastructure

10:12
are driving the virus's disproportionate impact.

10:16
We have a saying in public health,

10:17
"When you close the gap, you raise the mean."

10:21
The idea is that truly eradicating disparities

10:23
has the knock-on effect of raising

10:26
the baseline for everyone.

10:29
This is true for life expectancy, disease outcomes,

10:32
and quality of life.

10:33
Indeed, we've seen this play out

10:35
in real time during the pandemic,

10:37
because health inequity is the proverbial canary

10:40
in the coal mine for overall economic well-being.

10:44

So while the inequities we see now
10:46
may look like they're just about health and wellness,
10:49
they're warning signs of underlying risk
10:51
to the global economy.
10:54
As you grow into leaders,
10:56
you will have opportunities to close the gap
10:59
between the haves and the have-nots,
11:01
and raise the mean for all.
11:04
That in turn will shape the virtuous cycle of prosperity
11:07
that sustains communities and businesses alike.
11:11
And since healthcare is the largest
11:13
single employer in the U.S.,
11:15
working toward more equitable care for all
11:18
will have an outsized economic impact around the globe.
11:25
As you start down that path,
11:26
keep your eyes open for unexpected ways
11:29
you can make a difference.
11:31
Since I left Suffolk, my own path has been full
11:33
of unexpected twists, turns, and opportunities.
11:38
My next stop was Tulane School of Medicine,
11:40
and after finishing my training, I joined the faculty,
11:43
and entered on the traditional track for academic medicine.
11:47
In August, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck.
11:51
The levies failed under the brunt of storm,
11:54
inundating our city with water
11:56
and changing everything for New Orleans.
11:59
We lost an array of services,
12:02
from 9-1-1 to our transplant units,
12:04
and so we had to reconstruct the entire thing from A to Z.
12:10
Some people have asked why I became so engaged
12:12
in rebuilding New Orleans after Katrina.

12:15
I think it had a lot to do with growing up as an underdog.
12:20
I identified with the struggle New Orleans faced.
12:23
The city's infrastructure had been long ignored,
12:26
people often treated as lesser citizens.
12:29
That resonated with me because of my own life experiences.
12:33
I needed to do all that I could to restore our city
12:37
and reimagine the future for a place I called home.
12:42
As we faced this almost blank canvas,
12:44
we realized that we could do more than just put everything
12:48
back together again the way it was before.
12:51
We had a rare opportunity to reimagine
12:54
the role of our local health system,
12:56
not only as a lifeline for our community,
12:59
but perhaps as a national model for advancing health equity.
13:05
We had been knocked to our knees,
13:07
but chose to stand up together and build a better future.
13:13
We knew that what we wanted to build
13:14
would take a huge community lift.
13:17
It would require perseverance and tenacity.
13:21
Though difficult, the work strengthened my resolve.
13:24
In New Orleans, the health community took
13:26
that moment of crisis and turned it into a movement.
13:31
They're still working to improve access
13:33
and better care for all.
13:36
That's when I first saw the power of taking
13:39
a crisis moment such as Katrina or COVID-19
13:42
and turning it into a lasting movement for change.
13:47
I also appreciate how in moments of crisis,
13:50
everyone comes together to solve big problems.
13:53
The pace of innovation quickens,
13:55

and people, communities, and businesses work together
13:58
with a shared vision and mutual resolve.
14:03
That movement for equity became a touchstone for my life.
14:07
In New Orleans, I worked to address systemic issues
14:09
underpinning the devastation following Katrina,
14:12
and during COVID-19, I've had a similar experience
14:16
working with Google and our partners.
14:18
You see, I joined the company in December of 2019,
14:20
just as the pandemic was unfolding across the world.
14:25
I had to lean in to our company response,
14:28
but I was glad I could apply my experience
14:30
from Katrina to be helpful.
14:33
I'm often asked about parallels
14:34
between COVID-19 and Katrina.
14:37
Both were pivotal events,
14:39
events that shifted the world on its axis.
14:42
In many ways, COVID-19 has done for and to the world
14:46
what Katrina did to New Orleans.
14:49
It caused suffering and death, shredded healthcare services,
14:53
and disproportionately impacted
14:55
some of the most vulnerable populations.
14:59
Katrina surfaced the radical injustices of inequity
15:02
in health, social, and financial systems.
15:05
COVID-19 has highlighted those same injustices
15:08
around the world.
15:10
And now, as we come out of this pandemic,
15:12
just as we did after Katrina,
15:14
we all have the opportunity to build
15:17
a better, more sustainable, and humane system,
15:21
that cares for and supports people
15:23
no matter who they are or where they live.

15:27
Another thing I learned during our Katrina recovery efforts
15:29
was how critical strong partnerships and coalitions are,
15:34
especially when you want to enact significant change.
15:38
Partnership is a core value for us at Google,
15:40
and we have partnered with universities,
15:42
healthcare systems, and public health entities
15:45
to collectively shape the future of health.
15:48
We're working many ways with many partners
15:51
to tackle inequity.
15:54
It all goes back to how we engage with each other,
15:57
as local and global citizens,
16:00
and through public and private partnerships.
16:03
So let's talk about your future.
16:07
The weeks and years ahead of you
16:09
are exciting beyond this graduation.
16:12
I firmly believe that as the next generation of leaders,
16:16
you don't just need to be capable, educated,
16:19
motivated, and entrepreneurial.
16:22
You also need to be committed to community engagement.
16:26
These are the tools that will help us
16:27
dismantle systemic inequity, not just in health,
16:30
but in all facets of human life.
16:34
COVID-19 has changed us all.
16:37
It's changed the way we learn, live, and work.
16:41
Your class is entering the workforce
16:43
at an inflection point in history,
16:46
and I urge you to apply your Sawyer education
16:48
to turn this moment of devastation
16:51
into a movement for change,
16:54
changing how businesses operate
16:56

to be more innovative and impactful,
16:58
changing how technology works,
17:00
to be more accessible and interconnected,
17:03
and most of all, changing yourself,
17:06
to root your work in the communities you call home,
17:10
whether here at Suffolk or all around the world.
17:14
Being part of the movement for equity has changed me.
17:17
It's made me a better person, it's enriched my life,
17:21
in many ways that I will cherish forever.
17:24
And so, graduates, enjoy your achievements
17:28
and embrace your new privilege,
17:31
but also recognize the responsibility
17:33
that comes along with it and become engaged
17:36
to make a difference.
17:38
Your life will be the richer for it.
17:40
Congratulations, class of 2021.
17:43
You have lived through history,
17:45
and now you have a chance to make it!
17:46
Thank you all. (audience applauding)