

College of Arts & Sciences
Suffolk University
Commencement 2025

Honorary Degree Speaker
Frida Polli, PhD '07, HDPS '25

First of all, I want to thank Professor LoPresti for the kind words, and I want to thank the incredible faculty and staff at Suffolk University. And of course, I want to congratulate you guys, the Class of Suffolk of 2025. Give yourselves a huge hand of applause. [APPLAUSE]

This is truly a magical moment, and I know how magical this moment was because I once sat where you sit, a soon to be graduate of this incredible, amazing school. I remember the excitement, and also the relief. And I remember my graduation ceremony as a PhD student here, where I sat as a single mom. I had put the wrong diaper on my daughter, who then was not yet 2 and decided to pee in my lap. Hopefully that's not happening to anyone right now!

But in all seriousness, I also remember the uncertainty of graduation, the self-doubt, and the quiet pressure so many graduates feel to have it figured all out. So I come to you today not just as a scientist and an entrepreneur and someone who has done all those things that Professor LoPresti mentioned, but as someone to tell you that feeling the tension between where you are now and what you're supposed to be is your path in life. And I have some good news and some bad news.

So I'm going to start with the bad news. This feeling of uncertainty that you have today, unfortunately, is not going to go anywhere. At least that's been my experience. Challenging yourself and pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, which I'm sure all of you are going to do, is going to make you constantly feel, *Can I really do this?* So that's the bad news, OK? It's not going to go away.

But the good news I'm going to tell you in the form of a story. So I fell in love with neuroscience when I was 21 years old, and it was in a classroom of Dartmouth College. I am the daughter of a

mother who has schizophrenia. All my childhood and the rest of my life I've witnessed a mind and a life eaten away, bit by bit, by a very severe mental illness. And I wondered why this person I loved was falling prey to this tragic disease. It was at Dartmouth, in this neuroscience class, that I decided I wanted to understand my mom's condition better, and to help others who suffered from it.

And that's what led me to pursue a PhD here at Suffolk. When I applied to graduate school back in 2001—yes, a very long time ago—brain science really didn't even exist. It was in its infancy. And there was really no program that was offering a PhD. And yet Boston was the mecca of neuroscience. And so, I found this newly minted PhD program at Suffolk University, started by a pioneer of brain sciences, this woman named Dr. Edith Kaplan, who allowed me to be innovative and entrepreneurial and go and study brain science at the Athinoula Martinos Center over in the Navy Yard. And not only was I able to work over there, but I met some of the kindest, most passionate faculty, some of whom I reconnected with today, and that was so exciting.

But as I sat there, a first-year graduate student in this giant imaging center over in the Navy Yard, surrounded by Harvard Medical School post docs and faculty, it was not only a pinch-me moment, but it also brought on major imposter syndrome. And unfortunately, it was one of many moments of imposter syndrome to come. A few months after I had graduated with my PhD, I started my postdoc at MIT, and again, I started to feel that imposter syndrome. However, I pushed forward, and I asked myself, "Am I really helping people like my mother who've been devastated by this chronic disease by staying here and doing research?" And the answer, I thought to myself, was maybe not.

And so I decided I wanted to help take these discoveries out of the lab and into the real world. And so again, I did something not really expected, and I applied to business school. And it was kind of an unpopular decision among all my PhD colleagues, who said, "Why do you want a kind of BS degree? You already have a *real* one."

But that's not the path that I chose. I didn't listen to them, and I decided to go to Harvard Business School, and again, there was the voice of the imposter syndrome saying, "Do I really

belong here?” Here I was, a 38-year-old single mom amongst a sea of much, much younger people. And that same thing happened again when I started my company. So I’m here to tell you that this voice and imposter syndrome has literally followed me around.

But I’ve learned something really, really important about imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome tells you that you don’t belong, even when you’re already in the room. It tells you that your success is luck, and that your accomplishments are accidents, and whatever you are is not enough. That’s the bad part.

However, my advice to you, and this is what I’ve learned: When you hear that voice of imposter syndrome, take it as a sign that you’re exactly where you’re supposed to be. When I think, this is crazy or I’m not qualified to do this, I realize that’s just my brain’s way of saying, wow, this is incredibly amazing, and I’m getting the chance to do this, and it’s going to be incredible. It’s not a sign that I’m in the wrong place, or that anyone else here who suffers from it is in the wrong place. It’s a sign that you’re pushing yourself to the limit, and that you’re going to do something incredible and bold. The people who change the world, in my experience, are rarely the ones who feel comfortable doing it.

And that’s the other wonderful thing. When you stop listening to the voice inside your head that tells you you’re not enough, it allows a different voice to be heard. It’s the voice of inspiration.

The voice of inspiration sometimes isn’t loud. Sometimes it just whispers. And often, when it says the things that are most inconvenient, inspiration usually doesn’t align with your five-year plan or your spreadsheet or your to-do list. It’s quiet, and it sets us in a direction that honestly sometimes makes no sense on paper.

But I’ll tell you that every meaningful decision I’ve made, every decision that has changed my life, was made by listening to that voice. The decision to study neuroscience, the decision to leave MIT and go to business school, the decision to start a company as a 38-year-old single mom. And at every turn, I listened to inspiration, and it’s led me to some of the most interesting,

rewarding, and successful projects of my career. And also to meet the most intelligent, hardworking, diligent, honest, and kind people like some of the faculty here at Suffolk.

Listening to your inspiration isn't about having some grand passion or a perfect plan. It's really about noticing what you care about deeply, especially in these uncertain times. And what makes you curious, what makes you angry, what makes you stay up at night, all of these things, and then having the courage to follow it, even when that road makes no sense. Following your inspiration is always about saying yes to something that might make absolutely no sense to other people, but it makes sense to you.

I know some of you are going into jobs, some of you are going to graduate school, some of you are still figuring it out. I'm still figuring out. These are all value points. You don't have to have the answer today. But I will ask you to make a promise to yourself now, that you won't let fear masquerade as humility. Don't let "I'm not ready," or "I'm not the one" stop you from starting.

And when that inspiration whispers, or shouts, just listen. Because the world needs to be inspired, and therefore inspiring people like you need to exist. It takes people willing to take risks that don't always come with applause, and people who lead, not because, all of a sudden, they think they figured it out, but because they're willing to take the courage to try.

OK, hopefully that was short enough! Class of 2025, let me leave you with this. You're not an imposter, if any of you are feeling that way. You're an explorer. You're not making a mistake. You're definitely going to be making the moment. And you are nowhere near done becoming what you're meant to be. So be bold. Be different. Be curious. Follow what fascinates you. And don't wait for permission. Because where you go from here, excellence awaits you. I cannot wait to see where you will go and what you will become.

I want to give a huge hand of congratulations to all the graduates. And now go do something wildly, irrationally, gloriously inspired. Thank you. [APPLAUSE]