Good afternoon:

I am honored to be the keynote speaker at the 2011 Claremont Colleges Lavender Graduation. It was 31 years ago that I graduated from Pomona College. Sitting here like many of you, I thought I had my future pretty much mapped out. I kind of knew where I wanted my life to go- but what I hadn’t counted on was where LIFE was going to take me.

Today, I was told to talk about my activism on campus and how that prepared me to make my mark. My mark being, one of the founders of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation known as GLAAD: the media watch group of the LGBTQ community. But it wasn’t just my activism that made me choose to do what I did. It was my life that chose it. How I dealt with every situation, how I got shaped and stretched is what defined and continues to define me. If I had reacted differently to any of these experiences, it wouldn’t be me. And you will find that you can redefine yourselves several times. In fact, in your lifetime, you may need to. You have to be flexible and open to the fact that you may end up having several different careers or paths.

There are lessons that every experience will teach you- you just need to learn them and incorporate them into your life. I’m here to share some of the lessons I learned, just to help you get started.

My college career was unremarkable, really. I had wanted to Major in Physics but having graduated a year early from high school, I only got as far as Algebra 2. I needed Calculus, but
starting it so late wasn’t going to support the physics track, so I opted to remain in Math, which I also liked. But I chose this field not because I was passionate about it, but because I thought I should have a broader education. I was interested in theatre but since I was going to be working in the family film business, I thought: I should major in something completely different. I’m not really sure how I came to that conclusion, but, in my defense, many a 16 year old has arrived at conclusions, that have been just as bad. Look, it sounded good, but it wasn’t. In hindsight, Theatre or English or even History would have been a better choice. Lesson 1: Do what you WANT, not what you SHOULD!

My activism on campus, all started with a poster requesting submissions to a student run literary magazine called the “Spectator.” As in much of today’s advertising, the poster had a scantily clad woman to attract attention. But this woman was also in bondage and the headline screamed “SUBMIT”.

This irked some of us and as we started talking about it we felt we needed to do something. We created our own organization- Feminists Against Represssion (FAR). We launched complaints with the student government, put up posters of our own decrying the image, and held debates with the offending group. We made blood red T-Shirts with our name on it “Going FAR”, which we would wear around campus. The discussions got very heated with allegations of censorship and misogyny- but the great thing was that the discussions were campus, and even 5 college wide and we were on a roll.
Being with a dedicated, intelligent, feminist group of women was eye opening. And by the way, I’m not using Feminist as a euphemism. I was heterosexual and none of the other women identified as lesbian. Interestingly, I remember we needed to get more people to protest on our side. We figured the “gays” would want to join us- hey they were repressed. I remember going where the “gays” were meeting, it was in some dorm basement, and I was very nervous. Although my parents’ best friends, while I was growing up, were a Lesbian couple, I had never been in a room with so many gays my own age…and besides, the flannel shirts, short hair and butch women scared me. But I went along, and tried not to be prejudiced. I met some women that night, some of whom I would eventually get to know very well indeed. But that comes a few years later…

This was also during the time that Claremont Men’s College was about to open its doors to women and the CMC men were furious and they made it known. Their anger took a vile anti-woman slant and FAR retaliated. I think the statute of limitations has passed, so I can talk about this without getting into trouble, but just in case, I wont mention any names. We, at FAR decided to express our views about the CMC men’s attitudes, with a little attitude of our own.

In the middle of the night, dressed in our T-shirts and green fatigues, and armed with brushes and gallons of bright red paint we splashed the main CMC Quad with slogans. I don’t remember exactly what we wrote, but the gist was “you guys are complete and utter A-holes.” We had a get away car and we took a long route home, in case we were being followed. We went to bed that night with giggles and grins, anticipating the look of horror on all the CMC student’s faces, we couldn’t
wait! That morning - we woke up to rain. Needless to say, our red masterpiece of eloquent protest was washed away. Lesson 2: always check the forecast before your guerilla activity!

FAR had a few other hits, including putting honey on the handles and in all the newspaper dispensers around town that carried pornographic material. And at my graduation all our members wore our green fatigues and jackets and after getting our diplomas we flashed the audience with our red T-Shirts from the stage in Bridges. We were bad…very bad!

That experience with FAR gave me a taste for activism and civil disobedience…and I liked it.

My Junior year in college I became very close with my next door neighbor. We started by spending some time together and ended the first semester being inseparable. It was a platonic relationship, but when I introduced her to my brother and they went out on a date, I got furious. I realized that I had fallen in love with her and getting her together with my brother was a way, I thought, of keeping her close. Little did I realize that I had fallen in love and wanted her for my self. I declared my love on Valentine’s evening and alas, my feelings were not reciprocated.

I spent the remainder of the year heart broken and playing Meg Christian albums, way too loud. I can laugh now- but it was hard, as all rejections are. As catharsis, I wrote a play about it and actually had it performed in the “Smudge Pot” a basement space in the Coop. Difficult though it was, that experience was life changing: It presented me with the possibility that I could fall in love with a woman. I had never
considered it as an option for me. Now, I realized I could be open to the entire population and not limit myself to only 48 percent and I didn’t.

Lesson 3: Never say Never

After college, as planned, I went to work with my father in international film distribution. During this time, I met and fell in love with a woman. This time it was reciprocated, and this time my parents were not miles away but very much in the picture.

Now, coming from an Egyptian family, I was expected, to live with my parents until I got married – to a man, of course! My mother and brother also worked across the street, in the family dubbing studio so, working and living with my family while being in a relationship was not easy.

Oh, did I mention that they categorically disapproved and threatened to disown me on several occasions. It wasn’t that I loved a woman, they said, it was that this particular woman had children. “You’re too young. Don’t you want to get married? Don’t you want to have your own children and start your own family?”

Her family was not much better. They were Jews and to top it off her mother was a holocaust survivor. “She’s Arab and Moslem, are you crazy? Do you know what those people do?”

It was not an easy time - suffice it to say, we’ll be celebrating our 30th anniversary this August, we got married every time it was legal to do so, we had 2 more kids and yes, our families finally came around.
Lesson 4: If you want something bad enough, fight for it…or at least wear everyone else out.

Now, having sat at the corner of my father’s desk for several years listening in to every phone conversation, I quickly learned the ropes and I was running a company with over 50 employees at 22. I went on to get my MBA, while working, to supplement my education because I was going to take over the business and sustain the dynasty. But even with building a successful company, I was not fulfilled. I felt something missing in my life but I didn’t know what it was. I felt that so much of my direction has been predetermined and that I did not know what I wanted, because I had never been allowed to discover it. So, I decided to give myself a 30th birthday present. It was the most difficult and heart-wrenching decision I made, I left the company. Needless to say, my father vacillated between fury and sadness but I was resolute (at least by all exterior appearances.)

It was scary- I had no idea what I would do. I applied to USC Social School, I was going to get an MSW. Then I took the CBEST so I could teach kids in public school. Then I read an ad about a Gay-Media Group forming. I knew Media. I also knew gay- but not so much. Yes, I was in a lesbian relationship, but we really didn’t belong to the community, since heterosexuality had been both of our main experience and were very new at the labels. We were both foreigners, growing up in Europe and all my work experience had been international, so I hadn’t made local contacts or paid attention to the LA scene. I thought it would be a good time to learn about it. So, I called and went to one of the very first GLAAD meetings and never looked back.
Everything about this moment in time came together. My business savvy and my lesbianism merged in a way I would never have dreamed of.

My Media background was invaluable in dealing with the entertainment industry. Several of us had come from that line of work and so we could talk to the outlets in their own language.

Let me tell you about the climate back then- Gay people were much more closeted and straight people could credibly say they didn’t know any gay people because many were hiding. Sounds crazy now- but 30 years ago was different. This was a time of No cell phones, YouTube, or Facebook. Not everyone even had a computer or email. Our answering machines ran on tape and the fax machine was the big thing. There were no gay characters on TV or in film, and if there were they were always depicted either as the deviant or the comic relief. News outlets still talked about AIDS as a “homosexual disease,” and our community was continually marginalized, trivialized and defamed. But we helped change that.

GLAAD’s effectiveness and rapid success was due to the void we filled, the righteousness of our position and the professionalism with which we operated. We knew that to change the public’s negative opinion about our community, they would need to meet our community. We needed to become visible, not just in the media but personally. We had to market ourselves- our community was a commodity that was misunderstood, we needed to repackage our image with the truth of who we were.
My own growth was in direct proportion to how GLAAD grew. I learned on the go, not just about non-profits, but more importantly about the gay community and about my own prejudices and fears. In confronting them, I was able to relate to the greater society’s fears about our community and plot a way to overcome them, just as I needed to overcome mine.

It was a very exciting time. I remember being surprised at all the lesbian and gay lawyers that were in the room. When I went to my first Center dinner, a black tie affair with over 1,000 gay people. I couldn’t fathom the number. I even remember meeting my first transgender woman, Connie Norman, a feisty AIDS advocate with coiffed hair and manicured nails who was over six foot tall. It was mind boggling, and mind opening.

But why should I have been any different than the society at large in my reactions, expectations and prejudices? We were all raised in the same gay bashing world, we all had the lack of any realistic, let alone positive images of gays. LGBTQ people were invisible or, at best, on the margins of society.

I remember my trepidation at meeting the lesbians in college and figured the media executives, journalists and others we would be meeting with would be the same.

They had stereotyped us, just as I had stereotyped the lesbians. In many cases, they were expecting to meet radical effeminate men and tough butch women, so we jammed their expectations. When I went to meetings or did interviews, I always wore skirts, make up and I decided to keep my hair long during this time. My colleague, wore a suit and tie- This
simple devise called into question their preconceived notions and made them reevaluate their prior prejudice. Was it immediate? No. But it did make a difference- YES- hard to believe, I know, but true. They were assuAged into listening to what we had to say, instead of being fearful of what we might have come to demand.

These encounters invariably led to us answering very rudimentary questions about our personal lives, which had nothing to do with these meetings. Things like, “when did you know?”, “how did you know?”, “did your parents know?” People would start to confide that they had a second-cousin-removed who was a lesbian or a son who was gay. It was Homosexuality 101, with us patiently debunking various myths and untruths. The ignorance about our community was astounding, but then again, why would anyone be educated about this issue, since stereotypes and misinformation were left to prevail unanswered.

In growing GLAAD, I incorporated everything I had ever learned. Protests and guerilla warfare on campus were replicated in protesting against a homophobic movie like Basic Instinct, or a blustering sycophant like Rush Limbagh. The arguments I helped craft to the student government, helped articulate the subsequent letters to the editor and Op Ed pieces. Running the family company helped me chair our board and volunteers. And the debates were now televised, so my college acting classes came in handy.

It’s not just your college experience that will forge your future it is every single experience you have ever had, a culmination of
all your responses and takes on things. You need to be aware of the signals, or you can pass years in a feeling-less existence— in the wrong job, in the wrong relationship. Listen to yourself….learn from your experiences and follow your heart.

If left to ourselves, we usually gravitate to things that give us pleasure. Whether we are good at it or not is not the point- it is the passion we feel when engaged that propels us. If you haven’t found your passion yet- allow yourself to. It is not your experiences that define you- it is how you react to each of them. Good or bad- think back to these days- the clues to your formation and bliss are close by.

After my long tenure at GLAAD I went on to help to grow other non-profits, not just in the LGBT community, but in the anti-violence and homelessness movements, and now full circle back to Claremont, where I am working with alumni and the administration to help grown the QRC. And who knows where else I’ll end up.

And if there is one thing I want to impart to you- because that’s what I get to do as Keynote Speaker- give you advice- I advise you to keep your view of yourself as open as possible- Do not limit your experience and listen to your true self.

When you leave this Claremont cocoon, try to retain that feeling of invincibility that you may have fostered here. Try to hold on to the values and truths you worked out during long nights of discussion and contemplation. Give yourself room to continue experimenting and pushing your limits. This period of time in your life was a gift, make sure you treasure the
freedoms you had and create the opportunities in your life to do what you want.
And give back.
Yes- It is not enough for you to succeed, you need to always remember those that went before you, so you could have this time, this experience, this luxury of finding your self- your passion…you need to ensure that this possibility continues for those that come after you.
The writer, Paul Monette, used to often talk about the LGBT community being a tribe- with our rituals, our history our very essence- and that always struck me.

In “Mustering,” an essay in his collection “Last Watch of the Night,” Paul writes, in the context of the 1993 March on Washington. “And whatever is left of the hurt is washed away the longer you march, arm in arm with a comrade, rallying to the mustering of the tribe. Until there is no dislocation anymore between the broken shadow of your past and the fully human presence you’ve become. You have incorporated his pain and come to understand that it is the very fuel that makes the torch burn. No matter if they tell you you are only one percent, or that two thousand years of your people have just been revised and thrown to the winds. Nothing can dim the burning light. You are home free, citizen and elder, one in a million. And there is no America without you.”

Whether in your school or in the LGBTQ community, you are now the new crop- know from whence you came. Being part of this tribe comes with its responsibilities, and you now have yours- don’t shirk them.

Congratulations- expect great things!