

Galen University
21st Graduation Ceremony
Sunday, July 14th 2024
SCA Auditorium, Belize City
Keynote Address

Dr. Aline Harrison, thank you for that kind introduction.

President of Galen University, Dr. Rene Villanueva Sr

Chair of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Marcelino Avila

Distinguished Board members (Mrs Brittany Meighan Rancheran, Dr. Daniel Silva, Dr. Godwin Hulse, Mr. Hugh Obrien, Mr. Henry Anderson and the two newly minted members of the Board, Ms Beverly Wade and Ms. Becky Bernard.

Provost, Dr. Cynthia Eve Aird,

Members of the Diplomatic Corp, I see with us today Ambassador Lily from the Embassy of the Republic of China (Taiwan), Deans, Faculty, Management and Staff, and most importantly, to all the parents, partners and supportive community of friends of each graduate,

And especially to you the Class of 2024, the distinguished GALEN EAGLES for whom we all gather here today. Good morning and a very hearty and huge congratulations to you.

First let me thank the Provost, Dr. Cynthia Eve Aird for the kind invitation to be a part of your special day.

I must admit, while I preside over an environment on the capitol hill in the City of Belmopan that for many may appear to be a daunting challenge, I am keenly aware that my delivering your keynote address is what stands between those of you being given awards and recognitions and all of you getting to your celebratory lunches, toasts and festivities. I venture to say this is a greater challenge than any House meeting. At least here, I am assured I don't have to rise to my feet to repeat Standing Order 42 B which requires members to be silent while a member is speaking. So that is my 1st challenge.

I wish to speak to you about your role, as university graduates, in the national development of Belize amidst the many challenges and opportunities we have in front of us. And to do this in just under 15 minutes. This is my 2nd challenge.

And of course, Graduates, my 3rd challenge, is to sustain your interest for a few minutes since really, let's face it you have all now transitioned from graduands to graduates and you have had your degrees conferred, effectively you have graduated and just about now want to get the hell out of here.

To take this on, I decided it is best to do what I always advise others when they ask me what I do to overcome barriers or challenges; that is, be your authentic self. Be you. And be unapologetically you.

Here is what I have learnt through my experiences. The truth is for some of you, you may never see each other again. Life is real. We drift away. We keep our circles small. There is nothing wrong with that. I come from a fairly large family, a family of 8. About half of us have migrated outside of Belize. My mother has 12 grandchildren. Only 3 (that's 25%) remain in Belize. The cold reality is that in the 21st century, opportunities outside of Belize abound and are endless and quite tempting. Brain drain is a real issue and it is incumbent on the leadership in country (political, business, educational leadership) to address this if we want to contribute and sustain national development locally. Now don't get me wrong, I am all for maximizing your potential first and ensuring that you fulfill that potential. It is up to those of us in leadership to ensure we tap into that and find ways to collaborate to make it mutually beneficial and have those who have excelled outside of Belize to return to Belize or to contribute meaningfully to national development.

Some of you may further your studies and some of you won't. That too is perfectly normal and quite okay. Academic pursuits are not for all of us. And doesn't need to be to achieve success. Success should never be defined by others.

For some of you, being engaged in national development in the traditional way through politics, parliament, business, academia or public

service may be appealing and for many of you, quite frankly it may not. That is quite okay too. There are so many Belizeans contributing to Belize's national development without returning to Belize. Take for example, Dr. Elsworth Grant whose contributions and work at the Belize Cancer Center of Dangriga has impacted so many lives here. Or there is Mr. Irvin Henderson whose work at Pathlight has provided an avenue for many young Belizeans to access a quality education. Or my dear friend and colleague, Janine Coye-Felson, a senior diplomat in our Foreign Service who is the Lead on Climate Finance and Oceans for the Alliance of Small Island States affected significantly by climate change, witnessed only a few weeks ago with the catastrophic damage from Hurricane Beryl.

But there are so many Belizeans, at home, who are not in any political, parliamentary, government, business, executive or academic position who are contributing to our national development. I think of the many artists whose skill we enjoy be it through song, music, art or craft. I think of the artist Alex Sanker, who goes by the moniker Artist 4 Life, who you can usually see at the foot of the swing bridge in Belize City. He challenges us every time through his imagery and messaging to think conscientiously and promotes freedom of expression which is at the core of any strong democracy.

I think of the manatee man, Jamal Galvez, who champions the plight and struggles of the manatee and teaches us the importance of caution and protection of this precious marine life and conservation.

I think of Cristina Coc who is a leader in the fight for Maya communal land rights. I think of my own sister Silvaana Udz and the late Myrna Manzanares and the Kriol Council group who are ensuring that the Kriol Langwuj is not forgotten but is embraced with pride, respect and understanding.

I think of Michele Irving who is one of the founding members and the director for Dangriga Based POWA, which is the Productive Organization for Women in Action, championing the rights of our women and girls, working towards combatting domestic violence and discrimination against our women. I think of Caleb Orozco and the

leaders of the LGBT community ensuring that Belize never forgets that we cannot say we are all Belizeans if in our actions or inactions we exclude some of our Belizeans. And of course there is Celso Poot, your own Galen Eagle, a graduate of Galen University who is the Director of the Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center, the best little zoo in the world. He oversees the oldest wildlife rescue and rehabilitation facility in Belize which educates so many Belizeans, young and old, on Belize's wildlife through conservation science. This is what contributing to national development looks like. This is what contributing to national development sounds like. This is what it is. Some of it anchored with degrees and some anchored by the degrees earned through the struggles of everyday life.

As I look at you the Class of 2024, I am confident that you too will find your own way of contributing to national development, whether from home or abroad, whether through further academic pursuits or work experiences. In all the examples I gave and the many more not listed, the secret recipe to it is not really a secret... it is consistent, hard work. Day in and Day out. To be honest, being a productive, hard-working citizen is what will help us conquer any challenge and break down any barrier to help us further improve on the nation building of Belize.

Today is a major milestone for 147 of you. I note approximately 73% to 74% of you are women and 26% to 27% are men. More impressive than the current make-up of the House of Representatives in the National Assembly of Belize which sadly only has approximately 13% women. With so many women graduating today, I do hope the future is brighter for the parliament in attracting more women soon, perhaps some of you present today. Notwithstanding what you may see on TV, Tik Tok or wherever you source your news from. While I am elated that so many women are graduating, we do have a challenge to ensure we encourage more men to take on higher education. I am all for women empowerment, but I do wish to see more gender balance in education and of course, it goes without saying, in economic earnings as well.

I note there are 94 of you graduating with honors, that is an impressive 66% graduating with designations of cum laude, magna cum laude and

summa cum laude. Those of you with this distinction, can you please stand up. And let's give them their flowers by a resounding round of applause. It is a testament to your perseverance, commitment and resilience. Well done.

So today is an incredible day of love, joy, celebration with family and friends. It is a celebration of the hard work and the experiences you have had to get you here today as you navigated daily tests and challenges of living while pursuing your academic goals. Whether you graduate today with honors or not, the fact is YOU did it. You earned it. And in so doing, Galen University has fulfilled its mission of providing excellence in education and preparing you to achieve your dreams and goals, and in the past 21 years has been contributing to the national development of Belize.

Class of 2024, you really don't need to look further than your university's mascot. You ARE Galen Eagles. And the leadership characteristics of an eagle are all you need to guide you not only on national development but on your own personal growth.

So what are these:

1. Eagles fly high. They literally are at top of the food chain. So, you soar above the ground and you problem solve.
2. Eagles are fearless. No challenge or barrier is too high. You take this on. Failure is not an option, and the opinions of others are just that – opinions. They do not define you. Let me hasten to say here, as I have personally learnt myself, failure is a part of the journey of success. Failure teaches us humility and forces us to rethink and do a reset. National development requires it.
3. Eagles are tenacious. If you are graduating today, it means you did whatever you had to do to get to this point; you ARE persistent and resilient- you don't give up.
4. Eagles have long, powerful vision. So, you don't think of the now. Be visionary and strategic in taking the long view and not narrowminded short term solutions.

5. Eagles nurture their young. National development is about leadership that grooms and prepares the next generation, inspiring others to fulfill their potential

And one last thing, not to sound morbid on this day of celebration.

6. Eagles don't eat dead meat. No, they do not. No, I am not preaching about veganism here although I do practice it myself. But as a metaphor, don't get hung up on what is done or is in the past. Look for what is possible and new because Belize can be that shining example for progressive, sustainable development and Galen University through its program of courses and experiences have equipped you to pursue these and be change makers.

Let me leave you with this. If you don't remember anything I said, I at least hope you remember this – LIFE IS SHORT.

So, what you do with your time is critically important. What you choose to do, you can never get back those hours. So, choose carefully.

Take care of your health (mental, physical and emotional).

Don't let anyone define you. Be you.

Whatever you choose to do, work hard at it, make sure you are happy doing it or else why bother, and I can guarantee you in so doing you will not only spread kindness, something we all need to do better at, but you will also be a productive member of your community, your country and therefore effectively contributing to our national development.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share in this special moment with you on your graduation and in celebration of 21 years of Galen University.

Congratulations class of 2024.

Be bold. Be Brave. Be You.

I thank you.

