Thank you for that very kind introduction.

President Shapiro, Dean O’Keefe, esteemed faculty, proud parents, grandparents, siblings, and above all to the soon to be 2014 graduates of the Northwestern University’s School of Communication.

Back in the 20th century, I graduated from this very school, so when I was asked to speak to you today, my first reaction was, oh how I wish my younger self could see me now…I was soooo honored. My second reaction was – they couldn’t even get Jerry Springer, he was a Northwestern Alum.

I’m quite sure most of you have never heard of me. Aren’t they supposed to pick a “superfamous” person to give the commencement address to the graduates of one of the finest academic programs in one of the finest universities in this country?

As you may have realized, I’m not a “superfamous person,” but I promise you there is a reason for that. You see, I am a talent representative, I began my career as an agent and then left to build my own talent management company. My job is not to be in the limelight, it’s to aim the limelight. So if I have done and continue to do my job well, you will know of Angelina Jolie, Scarlett Johansson, Ansel Elgort, whom some of the girls may recognize from THE FAULT IN OUR STARS, and yasiin bey the artist formerly known as Mos Def, and formerly, formerly known as Dante Smith.

Grandparents – its ok; you’re not expected to know yasiin bey.

So your not knowing who I am is a great measure of my success.
Graduates – Not being a “superfamous” person, it may come to you as no surprise - I do not have a great wealth of experience in giving these kinds of speeches. So I did what any smart Northwestern grad would do: I Googled “commencement addresses.” They all seem to talk about failure. I don’t want to talk about failure. You’re going to have failures. There I’ve said it. Now dust yourself off and move on. Your first jobs are going to be hard. You’re going to be overworked and underpaid and your goals will seem miles away. So that’s the bad news.

Here’s the good news: You are the best and the brightest of your generation. Though you've braved some of the coldest recorded winters in Chicago history… eh…you got a little frostbite, your eyelashes froze together while walking from class to class, you learned firsthand the true meaning of the words - polar vortex… in spite of it all - you have achieved remarkable accomplishments. You have put on hundreds of shows including four Waa Mu productions in which not a word was written until you wrote it. You have put on numerous film festivals that had no films until you filmed them, your 12 a capella groups soothed souls both on and off campus, and your acts of kindness raised millions of dollars for charities that included childhood cancer, congenital heart defects, muscular dystrophy, autism and epilepsy. These accomplishments every last one of them did NOT take place in a classroom. Parents this is not your cue to ask for a tuition refund. These accomplishments happened because your children wanted them to happen, because your children chose to make them happen.

Graduates – these choices embody the character of what it means to be a Northwestern student. And now they embody you.

The greatest lesson I learned from my time at Northwestern was which of the guys at FIJI could make me the most realistic fake ID.
But the second most important lesson was that no one else was going to give me the life I wanted. I had to create it.

A lesson that was reinforced by my late mother. After college, I started a yearly tradition in which I cooked the entire Thanksgiving dinner from scratch – from the Turkey to the pumpkin pie – but one year, I was dealing with some stressful client issues at work, some family drama at home, and God knows what else, and I found myself, the day before Thanksgiving, crying to my mother on the phone because I hadn’t cooked or prepared a single thing. “What are you worried about!?” she said as I wept over the phone. “Just get it catered like everyone else.”

“But Mom,” I cried. “You don’t understand... I need to make it.”

“But You WILL make it,” she said. “You will make it possible.”

That has been my guiding principle – in my career and in my personal life: “make it possible”. Whether it’s Thanksgiving dinner – which, by the way, I did have catered, and which everyone loved! – or getting a client dressed for a premiere, or making something happen for my family – I give myself no other option than to “make it possible.”

So lacking the required commencement address experience, I had to think long and hard about the things that have lead me from where I once sat, where you are today – to this podium. What made that possible? And I thought about three flagship moments.

The first occurred shortly after I arrived here at Northwestern. My best friend was Jeff Blumenkrantz. Jeff was a performer in Waa-Mu - a theatre major, a great actor, a superb singer and a gifted composer. I worked behind the scenes. One afternoon Jeff
and I were walking through the sorority quad adjacent to Scott Hall on our way to Waa-Mu rehearsal. I was feeling a bit melancholy. I had never been around so many gifted people and I felt I had no particular special talent. As I explained this to Jeff, he turned to me in disbelief and said, “Are you kidding me? You’re a problem solver, a critical thinker, and a doer. When the job needs to get done, people turn to you make it happen. Without you, the show couldn’t go on.” Hmmm…. I didn’t realize that was a skill, but perhaps it was. Soon after, a few friends produced a record and a music video. I thought these guys were amazing and offered to produce another music video with them — this time with a larger budget and a lot more exposure. We were awarded a student Emmy for that video. We called ourselves The Niteskool Project.

When it was time to graduate, I thought long and hard about what I wanted to do, and kept coming back to Jeff’s words from that day in the quad. I loved the entertainment business, I loved helping people, and I particularly loved helping actors. Being a Northwestern alum allowed me access to the powerful purple mafia, whose members worked all over the entertainment business. One of our consiglieres even secured me an interview at the Creative Artists Agency, where I was immediately hired as an assistant, the first and most crucial step to becoming a talent agent. I did the overworked and underpaid thing and a few short years later achieved my goal: I was hired as an agent at the famed William Morris Agency.

Which brings us to story number two:

Working was not enough for me. I wanted to be a mother. However, in those days being a mother in the representation business was not a common occurrence. If you were a woman, reached a certain age, got married, or, worse, had children, everyone knew you were banished to the island of former female agents, where your only clients were suddenly your husband, your kids, and members of the
PTA. I quickly learned that in order to keep my job, I needed to keep my mouth shut, work twice as hard as everyone else, and make it look **effortless**. I did just that and I was given the greatest reward of all: two beautiful sons. My first, here today, 2013 Northwestern Radio, TV, Film Major and School of Communication graduate, Maxwell Saines and my little guy, who’s now not so little, Dashiell Saines.

I had it all: an adoring husband, two beautiful children, and an exciting job. **My life was perfect!**…..until it wasn’t.. 18 ½ years ago my youngest son Dashiell, my perfect little baby boy, was diagnosed with autism. The little I knew about autism I had learned through a communications disorder class I took here at Northwestern and the rest I knew from the movie “Rainman.”

Dashiell’s diagnosis left us feeling isolated from the world. In 1995, at the time of Dashiell’s diagnosis, the incidence rate of autism was 1 in 10,000 children. By comparison, today the incidence rate is 1 in 68 children and 1 in 42 boys. We had been let down by a misdiagnosis from our pediatricians, by improperly trained educators and practitioners, and by the lack of compassion and kindness in the world for him and for our family. A home computer and the internet were a relatively new phenomenon, there was virtually no autism community, and it was hard to find support of any kind. My son was out of control and each and every day he slipped further and further into his own world.

Why was there so little awareness? Why was there so little research happening? Why were there so few classrooms equipped to handle children with autism? Why was there not a community talking about this? Why weren’t “they” doing anything? Then it occurred to me: there is no “they.” We had to become the “they.” If we wanted something to happen, to change, “WE” had to do it. “I” had to do it. **I had to make it possible.**
So in 1997, we and a few other parents founded the Autism Coalition for Research and Education. The Autism Coalition united various splintered autism organizations in an attempt to give autism one united voice. Our goal was to raise money for biomedical research, education, and advocacy. So we raised money, lots and lots of money through televised specials on NBC, fashion shows, golf tournaments, and a host of other fundraising efforts. We not only met our goals, we surpassed them.

There are moments in your life that stand out. I remember sitting in my kitchen one morning and opening the New York Times to find the full-page ad that “we” had placed. The ad was simple. In the center were mismatched block letters that gave the then current incidence rate of autism with a slogan that read “if autism doesn’t affect you now, it will.” And it was surrounded by pictures of children, our children. I stared at that picture of my son for quite some time, not only because in this mother’s eyes he was stunningly handsome, but because I reflected on the days when I felt sorry for my son, for my family, and for myself. Seeing that ad made me realize how important my son’s life was. His life made a difference His life had purpose and so did mine.

In 2005, the then CEO of NBC Universal Bob Wright and his wife Suzanne Wright summoned us to his office at the top of Rockefeller Center to ask us to become the founding organization of Autism Speaks. Today Autism Speaks is the largest, most respected Autism organization in the world.

[pause. Take a breath.]

Which brings us…to story number three.

Back at the office, the world of agenting was getting more corporate. My clients needed and had come to expect a more
nurturing environment. So I left the William Morris Agency and opened up a boutique management company. One of the many perks of this new job was that unlike agents, managers were allowed to produce. A perk that led me to one of the most gratifying experiences I ever had: one where my personal life squarely met my professional life. I produced a film called “Temple Grandin” for HBO.

In the early days of my son’s diagnosis, my mother gave me Temple Grandin’s autobiography, *Thinking in Pictures*, which told of her diagnosis with autism and the story of how she came to be the world’s foremost livestock facility designer. As a young girl, Temple didn’t speak a word, and formed her understanding of the world by thinking in pictures. Her mother was told that there was no place for her daughter in society and that the best solution would be to ship her away to an institution. But Temple’s mother believed that though she was different, she was not less. Her mom believed that if she pushed and encouraged her daughter, anything was possible. And she was right. Temple’s unique perspective became her gift.

This book changed my life. I once again had hope for my son’s future. My pity party was now officially over. I called the president of HBO and told him I wanted to bring Temple’s story to the screen. I got the quickest yes in entertainment history… followed by a development process that was as slow as molasses. It took us 10 years to do justice to Temple’s incredible story, but I think eventually we got it right. We received great reviews, a 100 on Rotten Tomatoes, and a lot of awards. But what affected me most of all was the impact the film had on the audience.

I read tens of thousands of heartfelt Facebook messages from families affected by autism, people who knew people with autism, people who didn't know anything about autism, grandparents,
siblings, educators, doctors, people with autism themselves, and of course the mothers and fathers of children with autism.

“Temple Grandin” the movie allowed these people to understand their loved ones in a way they hadn’t before. As one mother wrote, “This movie gives me a glimpse into what my son’s world is like. It gives me a hope that I cannot simply put into words. Nothing will be impossible for him.”

If we ever question whether our lives have the ability to make a difference, the answer is “yes”.

To those of you in communication studies & those of you that have studied in Qatar, you are our leaders. You are the ones that will give us a voice, both domestically & abroad. Lead with conviction and remember you are our “they.” In the sage words of Walt Disney, “the difference between winning and losing is most often not quitting.” Don’t give up. You have the power to make a difference.

To those of you in the arts: You have the ability to make us laugh and make us cry. You can unite us; you can polarize us. You can inspire us, educate us. You can spark debate or bring us to magical places where the world is not what it is, but what we could only imagine it to be.

And while you’re waiting to become a “superfamous person” – maybe one who gives this very commencement address – Remember, you can be given a job, but you can also create one. Write a show, start a theatre company, a dance company, do standup, improv, make a youtube video, make a vine, just don’t sit at home…unless of course you’re a writer, then don’t leave, but just keep tapping away at those keys.
To those of you who have studied audiology, speech pathology, health communication, neuroscience and cognitive studies, you have already made the choice to educate yourselves in a field that at its core is about helping those less fortunate, those who face communication challenges. As a mother of a special needs child, words cannot express the profound gratitude I and others like me have for you. With your education, your patience, your perseverance, and your creativity you will give possibility to the seemingly impossible circumstances of others. The results of your beautiful hearts and well-educated minds have the potential to be present in every day, every hour, and every minute of those you are helping and their families ….So thank you.

I recognize that the only thing standing between you and those diplomas is me. So I have just one last thought to offer.

To this day, there is only one award I keep in my home and that is my student Emmy award that I won as the direct result of work I did here at Northwestern. I cherish that award because I earned it when I was your age. When the future was about possibility, ideals, and dreams. When we did things because we wanted to, not because we had to. Fun is the best thing to have. Don’t ever let anyone take that away from you. Love your job, love your family, love your life!

Thank you and congratulations!