
Good Evening everyone,

My name is Alexander Rodriguez

yes, like the baseball player

and I am a recent graduate of Aquinas College.

Over the last four years, I have had the privilege of wearing many hats on this campus. I earned a degree in Political Science with minors in Journalism and English Writing. I spent four years as a starter on the men's volleyball team, worked in the Writing Center, helped rebuild the student newspaper, spoke at Contemporary Writers Series events, and participated in fundraising efforts that helped raise more than \$70,000 for Mel Trotter Ministries.

Looking at that list, it might sound like I arrived at Aquinas with a clear plan and a clear sense of direction.

But the truth is, that couldn't be any further from reality.

When I first arrived at Aquinas College, my foot was already halfway out the back door.

I was freshly eighteen years old and had it all figured out. I knew who I was, the things that were important and of course how the world worked.

The truth is, I never really planned on going to college. I figured I would work, figure things out as I went, and see where life took me. Volleyball is what brought me to Aquinas.

Looking back now, I realize I was mostly confident in the things I hadn't yet learned. I came to Aquinas expecting an education. What I didn't realize was that I was about to experience something much more.

My first semester of college hit me like a shock. I struggled often to put any effort into those around me and I stopped giving into the community.

I remember Julie Bevins pulling me aside during my second semester. I had been coasting through Writing Center meetings, doing just enough to get by. She looked at me and essentially asked, "Do you even want to be here?".

If I'm honest, I didn't love hearing that. But I respected Julie, and her question stuck with me. So I started showing up.

I remember Dr. Durham getting frustrated with me because I turned everything into a joke. I thought being funny was enough. I thought if I could make people laugh, I could avoid taking things seriously.

I remember my best friend, Callahan Schwartz, questioning his own judgment because of the people I surrounded myself with and the decisions I was making.

I remember Coach Crane asking whether I wanted to transfer because, honestly, there were moments when I wasn't sure I belonged at Aquinas.

There were many opportunities for people to give up on me.

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And yet,

nobody did.

That is one of the greatest lessons Aquinas ever taught me.

When I struggled, people invested in me.

When I disappointed people, they challenged me.

When I doubted myself, they believed in me.

And when I considered walking away, they pulled me closer.

Julie didn't dismiss me. Instead, she challenged me to become more present. That challenge eventually led me deeper into the Writing Center community. It opened

opportunities I never could have predicted. I became involved in consulting, writing circles, Magna Verba, and eventually even served as a teaching assistant.

Dr. Durham didn't hold my mistakes against me. Instead, he welcomed me into another class. His patience encouraged me to pursue Political Science, participate in Model United Nations and Arab League, and discover talents and passions I didn't know I possessed.

Coach Crane encouraged me to stay when leaving seemed easier.

Cal reminded me that who I had been did not have to determine who I would become.

Though those moments seemed small at the time, I look back now and realize they changed the course of my college experience.

I look back now and realize my entire college experience was shaped by people who refused to let me settle for less than I was capable of becoming.

The funny thing is that my story at Aquinas doesn't fit the traditional college narrative.

I wasn't the perfect student.

My GPA wasn't perfect.

I mean, I hated homework. Like really hated homework.

I wasn't the student with a five-year plan mapped out down to every detail.

In fact, that's one of the things that made me feel different from many of my peers. Everyone seemed to have a plan. Everyone had some sort of mapped out end goal.

Political Science majors were headed to law school or graduate school.

And others around were beginning their long career paths.

But whenever people asked me what my plan was, I never had a certain answer.

I never believed life worked that way.

I didn't come to Aquinas because I had every step of my future mapped out.

I came because I wanted to grow.

I wanted to deepen my understanding of people.

I wanted to find ways to help others.

And somewhere along the way, I realized that growth doesn't always happen according to a plan.

Many of the most meaningful experiences of my life happened because I said yes to opportunities I never expected.

I became Editor-in-Chief of the Saint.

I became an orientation leader.

I joined organizations I never imagined being part of.

I met mentors who changed my life.

I formed friendships that will last forever.

None of those experiences were part of some master plan.

Yet they became some of the most important parts of my journey.

One of my most notable memories happened during orientation when I stood holding my orientation sign as a student leader.

As I looked around at all the incoming students, I remember telling myself something simple:

One moment of courage. One minute of being your true self. That can change your life.

I didn't know it then, but that idea would become the foundation of everything that followed.

Because growth rarely happens all at once.

It happens in moments.

Moments when someone challenges you.

Moments when someone believes in you.

Moments when you choose courage instead of comfort.

Moments when you decide to become a little better than you were the day before.

For me, Aquinas became a collection of those moments.

One of the experiences I'm most proud of was serving as Editor-in-Chief of the Saint.

The role gave me an opportunity to give back to a community that had already given me so much.

In many ways, that became one of the greatest gifts of my time at Aquinas:

the opportunity to invest in others the way so many people had invested in me.

It wasn't always easy.

There were challenges I wasn't sure I was able to handle.

There were moments when I doubted myself.

But I learned that leadership isn't about having all the answers.

Leadership is about showing up anyway.

It's about serving others.

It's about believing in something bigger than yourself.

Together, we brought back a physical newspaper, established a consistent online publication and helped create a publication that reflected the stories, voices, and experiences of the Aquinas community.

But even that accomplishment wasn't really about me.

It was about the people whose stories deserved to be told.

And that's another lesson Aquinas taught me.

Life becomes much more meaningful when it stops being about yourself.

When I arrived at Aquinas, I often made decisions in reaction to other people.

Sometimes I wanted to prove people wrong.

Sometimes I wanted to succeed despite others.

Sometimes I let criticism determine my direction.

But Aquinas taught me something better.

It taught me that I don't have to live my life in spite of others.

I can live my life for something.

I can live my life for service.

For community.

For purpose.

For faith.

And perhaps that brings me to the most important transformation of all.

When I came to Aquinas, I expected intellectual growth.

I expected academic growth.

What I didn't expect was spiritual growth.

You see, before college, so much of life felt planned.

Everything seemed to revolve around the next step.

The next goal.

The next achievement.

The next destination.

But Aquinas taught me that some of the best things in life cannot be planned.

Some of the greatest opportunities arrive unexpectedly.

Some of the most important relationships appear when you least expect them.

And some of the most meaningful growth happens when God takes you somewhere you never intended to go.

As I continue to grow, people will still ask me what comes next.

And the truth is, I don't know every detail.

I don't know where I'll be in five years. Truthfully, I don't even know where I'll be in five months.

I don't know every step of the road ahead.

But for the first time in my life, I'm comfortable with that.

Not because I lack ambition.

Not because I lack direction.

But because I trust that there is a purpose greater than my own plans.

I believe God is still writing the story.

And I have learned that my job is not to know every chapter in advance.

My job is to keep growing.

To keep serving.

To keep saying yes to opportunities.

And to trust where that path leads.

As I stand here tonight, I realize something remarkable.

The boy who arrived at Aquinas with one foot out the back door is no longer here.

In his place stands someone shaped by mentors, friends, professors, coaches, and a community that refused to give up on him.

Someone who learned that leadership is service.

Someone who learned that growth requires humility.

Someone who learned that faith sometimes means embracing uncertainty.

And someone who learned that belonging is one of the greatest gifts a community can offer.

To the donors, alumni, faculty, staff, and supporters gathered here tonight, thank you.

Thank you for believing in Aquinas.

Thank you for investing in this community.

And thank you for making stories like mine possible.

Because when you support Aquinas College, you are doing more than funding buildings, scholarships, programs, or organizations.

You are investing in people.

You are investing in transformation.

I know that because four years ago, I arrived here with one foot out the door.

Tonight, I stand before you as evidence of what this community can do when it refuses to give up on someone.

I arrived at Aquinas believing I knew everything.

I leave knowing that growth never truly ends.

And for that lesson, and for this community, I will be grateful for the rest of my life.

Thank you.