Andrea Popova, Class of 2018

You know when you’re at a big stadium concert, in your nosebleed seats—you’re in the very back thinking “Celine Dion probably doesn’t even notice I’m here.” But suddenly, Celine Dion points to your section of the audience and goes “You in the back! I see you! This show is for you!” Well, graduating seniors, today is our day. But to all of you in the back—to all our parents, mentors, teachers, coaches, friends, and those who couldn’t be here with us today: “I see you!” And I want to take this moment to honor you.

You’ve sacrificed a lot for us to be in these seats. I know, because I’ve seen it in my own parents. Boris and Nelli grew up in Bulgaria. They were my age when my dad applied for an economics program in the United States. There were no Glassdoor reviews or LinkedIn profiles to scope out, but the food on the shelves at every grocery store was dwindling. They had to wait in line for hours just to get baby formula for my big sister, Sophia. With a scholarship that made it possible, my parents left their homes in Bulgaria and crossed an ocean they’d never seen to move to cities they’d never even heard of. All they had in their hands was $100, and my sister.

My mom went to Law School, eventually practicing Immigration Law. My dad got his MBA and established his own CPA practice. It is difficult for me to even fathom the challenges they had to overcome, seeing as English is my first language, and I could barely get through Core Bio.

A few years ago, I asked them for the first time—“do you love what you do? Is this your passion?” They looked at me with their heads slightly tilted. “I never thought about this.” My dad said. “It was never a concern for me to do what I like.”

-(Beat)-

Nelli and Boris have always been frugal — my mom would probably argue over a penny if she had the time — but whenever it came to education, no book, school, or program was ever too much. Because in a time when my parents had every major obstacle in their way, they always saw education as the key to success. My parents urged me to go to the University of Chicago, because an institution like this is undeniably a mecca for success and opportunities. What some of our ancestors may not have even dreamed of, we now have well within our grasp just by the letterhead on our transcripts and the maroon on our backs.

Mom and Dad, you didn’t have the luxury of following your dreams or your passions. But because of your sacrifice, and because of the sacrifices of all of you supporting us here today, now we do. And we will make the most of this degree—this honor. We will cherish it and use it to its fullest potential. Because not everybody gets to sit in these seats.
What I will say to you all is this: for whoever fought for us to be here today, for whoever drove us to soccer practice, for whoever made sure we had food on the table, for whoever bought us our first graphing calculators, for whoever taught us to read, to ride a bike, to spell our names — for whoever that is to you, we have the opportunity to make it worth it. The sky is the limit. Thank you to everyone who has handed us a ladder and gotten us that much closer to it. Thank you.