First of all, I want to thank Mr. Lewis, Ms. Garriga, the Board, faculty and staff for inviting me here tonight to talk about a place that has changed my life.

The last time I stood on a stage at St. Andrew’s, it was 1988.

Thirty five years ago–

I’m pretty sure I would have been wearing a blazer with shoulder pads that made me look like a linebacker and sporting huge, frizzy hair, held in place by lots of mousse and a bad permanent wave.

On the popular scene, the number one popular songs were Michael Jackson’s “Man in the Mirror” and Def Leopard’s “Love Bites.” The most popular show on TV was the Bill Cosby Show - oops.

We listened to Journey’s Faithfully on big yellow Walkmen. And when we wanted to ask someone on a date, we had to use a landline - remember those?.

Ronald Reagan was president. A young senator named Joe Biden had just abandoned his first bid for the White House. And a New York real estate developer named Donald Trump was best known for opening the doors to his gilded palace, Trump Tower, on 5th Avenue. Gas was 90 cents a gallon.

Nuclear War was still a live threat – and many of us sitting here tonight had been terrified after watching a Movie of the Week—a relic of the pre-streaming era—called “The Day After,” about Armageddon in the heart of America.

And yet, in the midst of the larger world there was St. Andrew’s.

Quirky, original, accepting St. Andrews.

A touch of Bohemia in Mississippi, a home for the eclectic in an age - and state- of conformity, a place where the offbeat not only survived but thrived.

St. Andrews also seemed a refuge from the noise around us—not a retreat, but a place where we could focus on what was timeless.

When I look back on my time here, I think of so many things—my friends, my teachers, my growing up - the 6th grade class trip to Williamsburg when the bus broke down. Hanging out on the weekends at “The Dot.” The college trip that Adrien Lawyer and I took to Sewanee where my husband was our tour guide. On the way home, Adrien told me “You should marry little Meacham.” And I did.
Most of all, I think of the values our teachers instilled in us—values which were - as St. Augustine said - “ever ancient, ever new.”

Dare to do what makes you happy.

Be curious.

Embrace diversity.

I’ll take these one by one.

The first: Dare to do what makes you happy.

St. Andrew’s has always been home to the quirky and the iconoclastic.

Our senior physics teacher was so taken with black holes that not a class went by when we didn’t derail him into telling us how they formed, what we could never know about them, why they interested him endlessly. I didn’t learn much physics, but I developed an appreciation for having a passion and losing yourself in it.

As 7th graders, we were assigned (much to our chagrin) Winston Churchill’s History of the English Speaking Peoples as our sole history book. Fortunately, Scott Smoot, our zealous Humanities teacher - still the most brilliant teacher I’ve ever had - turned his boundless love of teaching to the stage, writing and directing the annual 7th grade Renaissance Festival with the same enthusiasm he might have brought to a Broadway musical. He taught us to see that Shakespeare was really funny and that English court drama was way more interesting than “Dallas” or “Fantasy Island,” staples of Friday night primetime. Mr. Smoot was one of the many teachers at St. Andrews who made me want to become a teacher.

My friend Scott Johnson - whose birthday I shared but unfortunately not his SAT score - was widely known as the smartest guy in our class. He went on to Harvard, where everyone agrees the most ambitious of the ambitious compete for the golden ring. Scott could compete with the best of them, but what I know about his later career suggests that he dared to do what made him happy. What a joy it has been to follow his musical career on social media, and to hear him play harmonica.

I know that my own career - with its winding path - was inspired far more by the teachers and students at St. Andrew’s than it was by my professors at the University of Virginia, or later at Columbia Teachers’ College. I got the same joy teaching Jane Eyre to a bunch of 8th grade girls in New York City as Mr. Smoot got teaching us. Later, when I got involved in the blossoming education reform world of New York City, I was driven by a belief that a focus on students over bureaucracy could slowly transform failing public schools into places where kids would have the same kind of experience I’d had St. Andrews. It was a hopeful theory, much more complex in practice.
I learned this the hard way. As the head of one of the first charter schools in Harlem, I was proud to think I could bring my own education and knowledge to bear on a neighborhood known for its inadequate schools. Very quickly, I had to reckon with my initial attitude of noblesse oblige.

One of the hardest things I’ve ever done was to face head-on the understandable skepticism that an all-black and Hispanic parent body felt when they learned that a privileged white woman would be their school leader. Those parents taught me everything I know about the complexities of service and of working in a diverse community. They came to love me, and I them. And what I learned there was a great gift.

When the ipad came on the market in 2010, I had the opportunity to join the team that was launching a reading app for kids. I knew nothing about technology, but I knew a lot about reading instruction, so I did it. It was thrilling to come to the office every day and have no idea what I was doing - to push myself beyond what was familiar. 12 years later, Homer, the company we founded, has helped over a million kids learn to read.

Now, as a result of a complete professional swerve, I’m the founder of an ecommerce business that champions artists and artisans. I spend a lot of time with madcap welders and sculptors and potters and glass blowers. They’d fit right in at St. Andrew’s.

I mention these snapshots of my resume not because I have cured cancer or served at the pinnacle of power, but because my peripatetic career has been guided by a search for joy.

The second value St. Andrew’s instilled in us was a sense of curiosity that was rooted in, but not limited to, the humanities.

We grew up in the shadow of a larger than life mural of Erasmus, painted in the 70s by a group of seniors. We read Gilgamesh. We learned that “Everything went back to the Garden in Mr. Mullis’ class.”

It has fallen out of favor in many quarters to focus on the classics. I won’t fight the culture wars here, and I should be clear that St. Andrew’s thoughtfully introduced us to writers and thinkers who weren’t all dead white men.

Still, St. Andrew’s believed in the value of humanism. One of our headmasters - Daniel Weisbach - had lived and taught in Greece before coming to St. Andrew’s. Every Friday, he performed one of the Greek myths without text. With his booming voice and careful choreography, he brought Homer alive to a few hundred teenagers in Jackson, Mississippi.

We memorized Tennyson’s Ulysses, and discovered that John Donne was brilliant enough to seduce his lover by going on about a flea. I delighted in all of it, and every step of my career has had something to do with a love of reading and stories.
Finally, St. Andrew’s taught us the value—even the centrality—of tolerance. Growing up in an Episcopal school, we were part of a long tradition of acceptance. We were taught to respect all creeds and to honor the individual within the context of a forgiving, loving and diverse community.

The commandment was clear: Love thy neighbor as thyself.

That is the heart of the St. Andrews ethos.

When we stand together at Graduation to sing “For All the Saints” we are singing about the blessed communion of ALL people. “All are one in thee, for all are thine,” is as much a line about our common humanity as it is about the Christian faith. It reminds us that we are part of something greater than ourselves.

Wherever my life has taken me, these values of St. Andrews have remained steadfast.

Dare to do what makes you happy.
Be curious.
Embrace diversity.

These are lessons St. Andrew’s has been teaching for 75 years. Aren’t we lucky to have learned them in this beloved place? And aren’t we blessed that they are taught still?