Keynote Address: Created with Purpose, Called to Belong

Thank you, Ms. McDermott. I'm truly honored to be here today.
The last time I stood on this stage, I was giving the graduation speech for the Class of 1995. Somehow, that was thirty years ago—but it feels like the blink of an eye.

When Ms. McDermott called and asked me to be the keynote speaker, I told her, *"You don't want me for that—I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up!"*
And honestly, that's true. I've had several different careers—many of them not by my plan, but by the Holy Spirit's. And, as it turns out, His plan has always been far better than mine.

If there's one lesson I've learned again and again over the past three decades, it's this: **be honest with yourself.** When you're hitting a wall—when your goals and plans just won't move forward no matter how hard you try—take your foot off the accelerator. The moment I stopped forcing my way, life became easier, fuller, and far more meaningful than I ever expected.

I was asked to share my career journey today. It's not the one I imagined when I was a senior here at AHN, but maybe it will help ease your stress about the future. Because that anxiety you feel right now at 17 or 18—about what you'll be or where you'll end up—it isn't worth your energy. You will end up where you are meant to be.

As the mom of a high school senior myself, I understand the stress, the pressure, and how much the college process has changed since I applied.

When I was 11, I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. Back then, it was rare, and the prognosis was grim. My doctors told my parents not to worry about college—or even about me having children. They said, "Let's just hope she's still here and healthy."
But my parents refused to accept that. After middle school they enrolled me at AHN to give me the best chance at a full normal life, and from then on, I was determined to prove the doctors wrong.

By my sophomore year, I had my entire life planned out. I wanted to graduate early—because I felt time was short—and I was laser-focused on becoming a pediatric endocrinologist. I was class president, cheer captain, head of several clubs, and even started a diabetes support group for kids at Ellis Hospital. I traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with senators about insurance coverage for diabetes supplies—something not covered back then, meaning my family often went without luxuries to afford my insulin.

As a first-generation college student from an immigrant family, we were "winging it." Despite my hard work, Yale and Harvard didn't accept me, and neither did the early med programs at Union or Siena. So I began at Union, transferred to Siena for financial reasons, and—long story short—changed colleges four times but never my major.

At Siena, I founded **Circle of Life Camp**, a nonprofit summer camp for children with diabetes to provide diabetes education and social support in a relaxed setting. Our first year, we had 26 campers and an all-volunteer staff of nurses, doctors, counselors, and even our board. It was life-changing—for them and for me. And it stayed volunteer until its closing 15 years later.

Around that time, I applied on a whim to a seven-year BS/DO program in Long Island. I wasn't a great test-taker and couldn't get accommodations for my diabetes—no glucose monitor, food, or water allowed during exams—so my SAT scores didn't reflect my potential and taking the MCATs terrified me. But miraculously, I got in! My dream was finally coming true.

By the end of my first year in the program I had written a book called *Growing Up with Diabetes: What Children Want Their Parents to Know.* I cold-called a publisher—Chronimed—and to my surprise, they said yes. It was the easiest thing I had done…applying to college was 10 times harder! Chronimed's division of health books was acquired by John Wiley & Sons the next year and my book took off! The book went on to be distributed by the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation (now Breakthrough T1D) for over a decade and helped countless parents see that their kids could live full, joyful lives.

But just when everything was falling into place, my health began to unravel.
I developed severe nerve pain, kidney failure, hair loss, and exhaustion so extreme I could barely get through the day. I ended up in a wheelchair. I went from doctor to doctor—even the Mayo Clinic—collecting diagnoses that didn't fit. Finally, an answer to my mother's prayers. A doctor was featured in the paper that treated people with similar symptoms as mine using vitamins and medicine. The doctor recognized that I had severe Lyme disease and multiple tick-borne infections. After a year on IV antibiotics and oral medications, I finally began to feel myself healing. That was also when I turned to ancient healing traditions—meditation, Reiki, energy work, nutrition, and naturopathy—to continue my recovery in a more holistic way.

When I returned to finish my degree—still in a wheelchair—I faced new challenges. Doctors told me, I'd never make it through medical school as a woman in a wheelchair. I was devastated. But through meditation I began to see a new path. The camp I ran had always been about emotional healing—helping kids live well despite diabetes and the book helped parents with that perspective. Maybe, I thought, I was meant to help others that way.

So, I decided to become a psychologist. I had never taken a psychology class in my life, but I bought a review book, studied for a week, and scored almost perfectly on the Psych GRE. I took it as a sign.
I was accepted into the Clinical Child Psychology Ph.D. program at St. John's University—one of only five admitted that year. My camp grew. I did my master's thesis and dissertation on the psychological and health impacts of my camp, published papers

on psychology and diabetes, and eventually became a guest editor for peer-reviewed journals.

Life felt back on track. I married my high school boyfriend from CBA, and my research and camp flourished. I even landed a fellowship at Yale in their inaugural pediatric health psychology program—the only spot offered that year. At first, I was rejected on match day, but the next morning I received a call saying there had been a system glitch and the position was mine after all. It was unheard of, and I took it as divine timing once again.

A few years later, after doctors told me I'd never have children, I had my beautiful daughter. Life felt complete.
Then, when she was two, my husband was diagnosed with a glioblastoma—stage 4 brain cancer—with 18 months to live. I was devastated. But I used the same holistic methods that helped me heal—nutrition, meditation, energy work—alongside his medical treatment. His doctors were stunned. He far outlived his prognosis, physically strong but left with cognitive decline from treatment. Unfortunately, he developed dementia when my daughter was three but he was physically healthy.

As a caregiver and young mother, I had to pivot again—this time for survival. Sadly, with the responsibilities to my family, I had to close the camp in 2012 at its peak. But my previous work in diabetes was not in vain. I took a job developing behavioral programs for people with diabetes as the Head of Behavior Science at a start-up which led to a leadership role at the **American Diabetes Association** as **Vice President of Lifestyle Management**—I was the first psychologist ever to hold any role, let alone an executive role at any diabetes organization in the country and a position that they created for me!

At the ADA, I was one of 12 doctors in the country asked to be on the committee write the ADA Standard of Care. I wrote **Psychosocial Standards of Care** —the first-time emotional well-being was formally recognized as part of diabetes management in the Standard Manual. This is still part of the Standard of Diabetes Care guidelines today used internationally. I also created a diabetes certification program for professionals in mental health. From there, I became VP of Patient-Centered Research at T1D Exchange, a new department, and conducted new and innovative research that I thought was important to the diabetes community which has launch several new lines of research today.

When COVID hit, I stepped back to care for my husband since in-home care was taken away and to be present with my daughter. Today, I am writing another book and run a private practice that integrates evidence-based psychology with the ancient healing methods that saved my life and sustained my family.

I help people live with purpose, balance, and joy—combining the science of the mind and body with the wisdom of the spirit.
And now, the healthcare world is finally beginning to embrace this integration that I've lived and practiced for 30 years.

When I look back on everything that has happened — from that 11-year-old girl who was told she might not make it to college, to the woman standing before you today — I see that diabetes didn't take my life away. It gave it direction.

Yes, it challenged me. It tested me. It forced me to grow up faster than I wanted. But it also gave me my *why.*
Because of diabetes, I discovered compassion, resilience, curiosity, and faith. Because of diabetes, I built a camp that became a second home for thousands of children who finally felt seen and understood. Because of diabetes, I wrote a book that helped families feel less alone.
And because of diabetes, I found my true vocation — to heal, to advocate, and to help others live with joy, purpose, and belonging, no matter what challenges they face.

That's the beautiful part of life when you let go of your plan and trust God's: the very thing that seems to break you often becomes the thing that builds you.

When I was a student here at AHN, I didn't yet understand that I was *created with purpose.* But every moment — the heartbreaks, the disappointments, the triumphs — all of it shaped me to serve in the way I was meant to.

And along the way, I found where I *belong.*
I belong in the space where medicine and humanity meet — where science honors the spirit, and healing is more than just physical.
I belong among the people whose lives I've touched, the children who found hope through camp, the families who learned that their story didn't end with a diagnosis, and the communities that grew stronger because we believed in each other.

That's what belonging is — not about fitting in, but about living in alignment with the gifts God gave you, using them to lift others up.

So, to the students here today:
You were created with purpose, even if you don't yet know what that purpose is.
You already belong, even when life feels uncertain.
Your challenges will not define you — but they *will* refine you.

Trust the detours. Embrace the unexpected.
And when life hands you something that feels impossible, remember — it might just be the beginning of your calling.

Because the truth is, I didn't choose this path.
But I was created for it.
And so were you.

Thank you.