Thank you all so much for the opportunity to speak on behalf of our class. I'm only one of the many amazing voices and advocates in our cohort and it's an honor to represent you today.

Before I go too far, I'd like to say hello and surprise to my parents who had no idea if be making this speech. Quite similar to how they had no idea I changed my major to social work until I'd already done so.

Like so many of my peers I came to UT with another major but had social work deep in my heart all along. I'll speak for myself and admit that I was afraid to pursue the major because I was scared that I'd be poor. If only I had a dollar for every time someone said, "Oh you're a social work major, you must be prepared not to get paid anything..." But regardless of what others said we all found out that what's deep inside of you, you can't run from, so we ran toward social work, and in its true fashion it embraced each of us and our unique identities.

While today commemorates the end of us formally learning how to be effective social workers, the truth is that we've spent four years truly learning how to be more of ourselves. I firmly believe that social workers aren't made in college, they're made through life experiences. We became social workers when we lost that close relative, but despite our pain we still had to comfort and take care of our loved ones. We became social workers when we witnessed poverty first hand, and found the resources to help ourselves and others in need. We became social workers when we realized that there was something different about our approach to problems and the ills of society, and while other majors see our sensitivity as a weakness, we use it as a strength. We became social workers far before we knew what college we were going to, or even that there would be a major to fit our passions so closely. And we have those in the audience to thank for helping us get here.

Just to be clear, families and friends, while we appreciate your support in our college endeavors, it wasn't that support that drove us to social work. It was that time you complained for hours, and we sat patiently listening to all of your griefs. It was that time you had no idea what you were doing so you confided in us, only for us to help you find the answer and inspiration in yourself instead of giving you advice. It maybe even was that time that we asked about your “self care” just to have to explain what self care was. Regardless of what it was, it was your involvement in our lives that helped us see ourselves for who could truly be. An amazing, hard working, life changing, resource providing, inspiring social worker.

Because let's be honest, the world needs us! They may not see it that way we see it, but social workers really make the world go round. We're behind the scenes providing counseling for those in broken homes to even the most influential entrepreneurs. We're helping families find their way out of poverty and comforting people dealing with abuse. We're in schools helping children stay focused and providing them with their unmet needs and we're even in the Capitol advocating for our communities and wiring legislation that creates opportunity. The field of social work is literally a circle that ties in every other profession, connecting problems with solutions.

And while we're on the subject of circles, can we talk about how every single social work professor, loves to arrange their class in a circle. We literally move the desks everyday to create the perfect circle. I have to say, initially I was a little leery about having to sit that way, where everyone can see every single
thing you do at all times. Try falling asleep in a class when the chairs are arranged in a circle… EVERYONE can see the exact moment when your chin hits your chest and your head bounces back up and you wake up to stares and giggles not just from your classmates but also from your professor.

But I believe that was the goal. When you arrange yourselves in a circle, you ensure that no one has the opportunity to be overlooked or to hide. You can tell when someone is having a rough week, so that you can properly be there for them. You can see when someone wants to build up the courage to talk and so you help make space for their voice. And even when discussion gets controversial, you have to look in the face of the person your opposing, and while you may not agree with them, you’re forced to see the humanity in their opinion.

And that’s what I want to charge the Class of 2015 with. When we leave this campus and go out in the world, let’s continue making circles. In our new workplace, let’s create environments where those around us are always seen and heard and properly taken care of. In our families, let’s create conversations open for disagreement, in a way that still addresses the validity of our opinions. And in society, where so many people are figuratively in the back of the room, let’s rearrange positions so that no group, no race of people is at a greater advantage than the other.

You all already have everything you need inside of you, now it is your time to pull it out and be the change that the world needs us to be.

Congratulations to the social work class of 2015 and Rest In Peace to my Grandmother Jerene and my Uncle Purvis, I love you and I hope I’ve made you proud. Thank you.