

## Sara Shikhman

# Sara Shikhman Commencement Speech Undergraduate Exercises, New York City

Many of the most outstanding people gathered here today will not receive a degree. But without you, we would never have gotten this far. So thank you to the families and significant others of the graduates, and thank you to the faculty, staff, and trustees of Pace University.

My childhood was far from ideal. The country of my past hindered growth and encouraged conformity to a grotesque social system. On Rosh Hashanah, or Jewish New Year in 1990, my family's synagogue was set ablaze minutes before we arrived. The word "Jewish" on our passports became an electric wire fence between us and the rest of the Ukrainian people.

A University degree was not an option for a poor Jewish girl from Ulitza Kurnatovskovo in Ukraine - it was merely a dream. In 1992, my family took this dream, one-way tickets, and little money, and followed the beacon of freedom 5,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean. In America, this dream has taken my family through poverty, public assistance, unemployment, (pause) and triumph.

Each person gathered here has a different story to tell, but we all share a similarity in perseverance, intelligence, and strength that brought us to this magnificent moment. And we are too smart to let our differences stand in the way of our dreams.

When I shyly walked into my first class at Pace, I felt like I was in the lobby of the United Nations. I encountered people from virtually every race and religion. Pace gave me an opportunity to work with an array of amazing people both in and out of the classroom. I would not have given up this experience for the world. I learned first hand the great value of diversity and the need to embrace and cherish it. No one can graduate from Pace and not understand that underneath the superficialities of race, religion, and ethnicity, we are all human beings with common needs and noble aspirations.

Pace University empowered us with the tools to become the leaders of our lives, and not be lead by others (pause). We must take charge of our lives NOW. What happened to my family and many of yours is simply unacceptable. The sad part is that it continues to happen today. Education not only gave us to tools to survive, it also gave us the privilege and responsibility to challenge society's stereotypes and eliminate the unnecessary hatred that exists all around us.

So as you walk out of this magnificent theater, do not let your hearts and minds get dull. Welcome every opportunity to challenge what's expected of you and rise above society's expectations, and create your own. Gloria Steinem, one of the founders of the contemporary women's movement, was a commencement speaker in 2001 at Pace, New York. In her speech she said, "life is unexpected, provided that we make it so." We have all taken a giant leap by getting a degree from Pace. The dream is now in our hands. Lets make it real!

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