Good afternoon. I want to thank Ms. McGregor, the selection committee, my dear friend Jossalyn for nominating me, but most of all the Westridge School teachers who sent me off into the world with a great foundation in the sciences and the humanities. To that, I have to add that I am also grateful for the example they set regarding the importance of becoming a thoughtful, well-rounded human being. Some people, Jossalyn being one of them, know exactly what they want to be practically from the moment they are born – okay from the time they were three years of age – and then embark on a focused post-high school quest to make that dream a reality. Others like me are more dreamers than dream-driven, and opt to take a meandering path leading to unexpected, sometimes delightful, and sometimes painful places. Westridge provides an important foundation for those like Joss who have always known exactly what they wanted to do, but it provides even more critical skills for those like me that take more exploratory paths through life. Of all the skills I gained at Westridge, the two I hold most dear are the gift of critical thinking and the ability to write and communicate ideas.

I remember the day, in Betty Cole's class, when we were challenged to imagine ourselves having a very different formative experience by playing a game in which education and opportunities were assigned in a game of random chance. My friends were disturbed, even angry at the unfairness of having their imaginary futures limited by happenstance without the chance to overcome by hard work and merit. It was Betty Cole who taught me so much. Other experiences were equally memorable and challenging: learning to make a meal that would have been eaten by ancient Romans, discovering the difficult journey of women writers throughout history by participating in the play “A Room of One's Own,” and interacting with difficult but lovable foster children through a volunteering program. These seemingly unconnected experiences, and too many more to recount throughout my time at Westridge, had one thing in common. They were challenging experiences, they forced me to think about life from a different perspective, and in aggregate, they trained me in objective but creative self-examination.

Not that self-examination is in anyway foolproof. I thought, in setting off for college to study diplomacy, that I had successfully applied my skills and found my life's work. Instead, I was frustrated to no end by the constant debates essentially arguing over opinions with no real metric or standard by which to measure objective truth. So I applied a little more of those critical thinking skills I learned here at Westridge and realized that perhaps a career in the sciences was the place for me. In medical school, residency, research fellowships, and throughout the process of getting first a Master's degree and then a PhD, those skills helped me determine the next step to take, convince others that I should be accepted to the program I was applying for or the position I was seeking, and succeed in the role once it was mine. In this I had incredible help: I was fortunate to have not one but four mentors during my research fellowship years. While balancing their competing ideas could be frustrating, there is no substitute for having a top person in the field teach you to step back and look at your own ideas and actions objectively. And because of the early training I had in the classrooms at Westridge, I was better equipped to put my ego aside and not only learn to take the constructive criticism, but also take on the challenge of being my own best critic.
In my current job, Director of Global Clinical Safety and Pathogen Reduction Technology Scientific Affairs (I didn’t pick the title - no Westridge woman would have selected such awkward phrasing), at a medical device development company, the writing and critical thinking habits I learned at Westridge are invaluable, as is the medical and scientific training that they made possible. I am the principal investigator on four major blood product-related development projects funded by US government contracts totaling over 200 million dollars. It is my job to ensure that at the end of development, we have products that are not only life-saving, but integrate seamlessly into current medical practice, provide proven benefit, and meet FDA and other regulatory approval standards. These projects exemplify translational science in action, in other words, taking the findings from basic and preclinical research and turning them into solutions to clinical problems faced by doctors who treat patients. My meandering path is serving me well. I use my knowledge of medicine, hospital settings, and clinical practice; my understanding of regulatory standards and policies; my experience working in a government research laboratory; and my scientific training to help guide and influence development, clinical evaluation, and regulatory approval of these products. And you guessed it, the key skills needed are critical thinking and the communication of ideas.

No one who works in medicine and science today works in a vacuum or is single-handedly responsible for the success of any project. I did not start the projects I lead, but rather am continuing the work of giants. I work with tremendously talented cross-functional teams made up of knowledgeable professionals from many different fields, and I am lucky enough to continue to be guided by mentors and scientists (physician or otherwise) at the pinnacle of their fields. The products we work on were conceived from the experience of military doctors encountering medical conundrums in the treatment of young men and women who literally put their lives and their family’s future on the line to protect our beautiful American dream. Without them, the work we do would not be possible and we and future patients owe them a debt of gratitude. More than anything, I am profoundly grateful for the exciting and meaningful work in which I am privileged to participate, for the brilliant people who enrich my experience and challenge me to constantly improve, and for the diverse opportunities that have captured my imagination. But most of all, I am profoundly grateful for the skills I learned here at Westridge that sent me on this colorful journey.