

**Excellence and Opportunity**  
College of Education and Human Services  
Michigan College of Optometry  
May 9, 2015 – 9 a.m.  
David L. Eisler, president

For every student who crosses our stage today there is a story, a story of personal commitment, effort and sacrifice, which brought them here today. In the successes, triumphs, and achievements of these graduates we see our hopes and dreams for the future, a future that is bright and promising and filled with opportunities that are yet to be discovered.

This next graduate represents in every sense of the word our value of opportunity, something that we trace back to our founders and that is at the core of who we are as an institution. She came to the university as part of the Ferris Youth Initiative program, which helps support students who have aged-out of the foster care system. Despite two different times in her life when her family situation required the help of foster care, and also dropping out of school in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, this graduate went on to finish an adult education high school completion program. She then applied to Ferris in the Criminal Justice program with the ultimate goal of earning her undergraduate degree in preparation for law school.

During her time at Ferris, this graduate faced the additional challenge of taking guardianship of her younger sister. So in addition to her academic responsibilities, she had to get her sister enrolled in school, attend teacher conferences and essentially become a parent overnight.

This graduate has not only met the challenges with which she was faced, but surpassed them. She was one of only 12 students chosen nationally for an internship with the Congressional Coalition of Adoption Institute in Washington, D.C. While there she sent a policy recommendation regarding foster care to Congress, and spoke at a congressional briefing on the issue. She also performed a separate internship in Washington with Sen. Debbie Stabenow's office, where she worked on constituents' concerns and the Senator's communications.

In her application for the Congressional internship, this graduate wrote: "I had the privilege of learning early on that it is not the hand you were dealt or the strategic way you plan to play the game. It's all about your game face. It's looking complication, struggle and defeat in the eye and saying you're not better than me or the end of me."

Thanks to her dedication, hard work and focus of purpose, this graduate has been accepted to attend the Michigan State University College of Law, and has also received scholarship support for her studies there.

Only about three percent of people who come from the foster care system earn their undergraduate degree, to say nothing of continuing their education further. This is a graduate who I have watched grow, mature and blossom as she has worked in our office. She has tenacity and determination, having faced down challenges that would have defeated many of us and done so with poise and grace. As such the emotions of this moment are both proud and humbling.

In graduating today, she recognizes her birth mother, Denise Jenkins, her grandmother Jeryl Ervin who has been an inspiration to her, and her foster mother, Glenda Heidelberg. Also case workers Cystal Cobb and Tarah Kline. She has members of her Ferris family to thank: Academic Advisor Susan McNamara who this graduate calls her mentor, Criminal Justice faculty members Tim Eklin, Nancy Hogan, Steve Hundersmarck, Russell Lewis and Mischelle Stone. Also, David Pilgrim, vice president for Diversity and Inclusion, Nick Campu, associate dean of Student Life, and her fellow students and close friends, Blake Buckingham, Savannah Sims and Vincent Veldink.

It is a pleasure to present to you Kaylia Ervin, and I would ask that she stand and be recognized. Would her family also rise?

Graduates, on behalf of our University I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment. As you receive your diploma today I encourage you to reflect upon the education you have received, the many people who helped you arrive at this moment, and the good work and determination that you yourself have shown in reaching this moment. As you set out on the next step of your life and career, you will face times of disappointment, but also times when the biggest challenge is to go the extra mile to seize an opportunity. During those times, think of the examples that Samantha Fordyce and Kaylia Ervin give of how opportunity, very hard work and the determination to succeed and excel can help you embrace success.

Congratulations and best wishes, Class of 2015!