

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | The College  
**CLASS DAY 2019**  
JUNE 14

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It's no secret: UChicago is hard. An alumnus of the college, class of 1998, once told me that he felt nothing in life was difficult after his time here. Until recently, I expected the same for myself, believing that this trial by fire and Chicago winters and 20-page research papers would give me some mastery over my world and my fate come graduation.

Over the past year, I've seriously reconsidered the potentiality of my UChicago education. This February, I turned down an offer from a corporate firm and decided to pursue my dream of becoming a pastry chef. I was *terrified*. My *parents* were terrified. Career Advancement was *shook*. No part of the curriculum taught me how to sharpen a knife, how to navigate the hierarchy of a kitchen, or how to tell when a sugar syrup had reached 118 degrees Celsius. But in reality, I was more than prepared.

Because what did UChicago teach us if not how to push back against the expectations of others and the conventions of history and society? What did UChicago teach us if not to ask the right questions, to do bulletproof research, to search for lessons in every experience? What did UChicago teach us if not to boldly step into the office of an esteemed expert and ask for advice and a job, whether it be as a research assistant or line cook? Going into the kitchen, I might not have had a map, but I had been given the compass, and at UChicago, I forged the tools. UChicago is not a culinary school by any measure, but in teaching me to be courageous and to nurture what I love, whatever that might be, it produced an aspiring chef all the same.

But there are bigger challenges than changes in career. Fall quarter, I made the decision to go on medical leave to focus on my mental illness. It felt like I had failed as a UChicago student. I told my thesis advisor that I was trying to reach the surface for air, that I was drowning at high tide. And Professor Levi-Martin, the kind genius he is, told me to be a jellyfish. He said, "[at] High tide, Jellyfish float. Remember that? You stay in place. Don't need to swim at all." When you're so used to swimming forward and upwards, the hardest thing is to pause, to breathe, to float.

But again, I found that I was prepared for this shift in focus from class to my wellbeing. Because what did UChicago teach us if not to ask *ourselves* the right questions, to look at the facts of our lived experiences and feelings, and to ask for support and accept help even when we really, really don't want to, whether it be for our psets or depression? UChicago taught me, in theory and definitely in practice, that what makes hard things hard is the self-inquiry it requires, and that this interrogating of our own desires, values, and limitations, is an indispensable part of coming into our own. In my case, it literally made life more worth living.

For me, the hard thing was to pursue a restaurant job when everything about my resume screamed "business casual and Microsoft Excel." For others, it's to end a toxic relationship, to build an RSO around a cause they care about, to pivot from econ to concert saxophone, to stay hopeful when the circumstances do not call for it, to be a queer woman of color in a world where that isn't the easiest thing to be, and to see ourselves as deserving of love and self care. And today, we have done the

very hard thing of graduating from the University of Chicago. I don't pretend to know what awaits us beyond this campus, but if UChicago taught me anything, it's that each of us are more than prepared for the hard things ahead. And if all else fails, just float.

Congratulations, class of 2019. We *will* make our way.