

CLASS DAY 2019

JUNE 14

Mary Blair, Class of 2019

In reflecting on my time at the University of Chicago, my mind first goes to a formative moment in my first few days on campus. I had come from a predominately Black public high school and was having a hard time adjusting to the environment of an elite institution with an incredibly small population of Black students.

I was sulking in Hutchinson's courtyard, reflecting on some incredibly isolating and humiliating experiences I'd had in my first weeks of classes; from a teacher accusing me, the only Black student in my class, of smelling of marijuana... to being asked if I was in the right place when I walked into my first SOSC class—the message from the campus community was abundantly clear—I didn't belong here. I remember feeling deep shame and overwhelming self-doubt, and I felt to my core that UChicago was not the place for me. So, I sat there, alone in a crowded space—an imposter on my own campus—and began thinking of which college I would transfer to.

A few moments later, a Black woman, who I later found out was the then-President of the Organization of Black students, approached me. She sat next to me and encouraged me to open up about how I was feeling about my first week of class.

“Well,” I said, “I know it's only been about a week, but I honestly feel like I'm going to have to transfer. I just don't feel like I belong here,” I admitted.

She said to me, in the most reassuring way, “I can definitely understand that. To be honest, the thought of transferring has crossed the mind of basically every Black student I know, but if students like you always leave, then UChicago will never become a better place for, well, students like you. So, please, don't transfer.”

She saw something in me that I did not see in myself, and this conversation, albeit brief, gave me an entirely new outlook on my role on campus. For the first time, I began to consider the fact that I had the opportunity and resources to create space at UChicago for those, like myself, who typically have little (or sometimes none at all). The following week, I was elected to the OBS BOArd, and that was the very first time I felt like I truly had a place on campus.

Since then, my campus involvement has always been a mechanism for fostering community for students that feel like they don't belong. In many ways, my involvement with student life was just as much for my own survival as it was for fostering community for others.

In making space for others, I made space for myself as well.

I devoted my time to the Organization of Black Students, because without it, I had no community, and if I didn't do my job well, other Black students would feel as though they had no community either.

I devoted my time to Leaders of Color because, I wanted to make sure that other first-generation college students like myself had the necessary tools and guidance in securing internships and fellowships.

I devoted my time to Chicago Peace Corps, because I could only wish that an organization like Chicago Peace Corps existed for me when I was in middle school—not only for the sake of tutoring, but because it would have been invaluable to see women that looked like me and had backgrounds like mine not only attending a school like the University of Chicago, but teaching me about restorative justice and how to implement in my own community.

The list goes on.

The point is that my campus involvement was just as much a means for survival as much as it was an attempt to **lift as I climb**. Creating space and caring for others was a way that I cared for myself.

I say all of this to say that graduating from a school like UChicago is a huge accomplishment, but it is also much more than that—it is an opportunity, more specifically a responsibility—to make space as you take space.

Graduating from the University of Chicago is an immense privilege, and some of the most high-achieving people I've ever met are in this class alone—world class athletes, nationally and internationally recognized scholars, future teachers, incredible activists and organizers, and the list goes on. Just imagine the impact we could have on this world if we used the access and privilege that a University of Chicago degree affords us to amplify the voices of those that institutions, like our University, have historically ignored and often actively silenced.

So as we go forth and forge our own paths, we must remember those that do not have the same opportunities. I encourage you, I encourage us, to make room at the table for those that typically don't even have access to the room. Amplify the voices of those that society seeks to silence, and most of all.....lift as you climb.

Thank you.