Katherine Stolerman ’17 Shares Her Perspective on Power
"Power is the courage to move just one person to safety, or progress, or hope." This was the defining statement of Katherine Stolerman ’17, legal studies major and sociology minor from Marblehead, Mass., as she delivered her remarks as the student speaker for the 2017 Celebration of Excellence.

Ms. Stolerman’s prepared remarks are below:

“Faculty, parents, family, friends, and members of the Commonwealth Honors College class of 2017, it is my great honor to stand in front of all of you today. I would like to first recognize the faculty, advisors, and peer advisors who bring us here together. Their tireless commitment to honors students inspires us to strive to leave a mark on a variety of disciplines and endeavors, as well as to give back in the same way that they all have.

“When I came to UMass, for me, as for many of you, the Honors College was one of the most important factors in that decision. As a high school senior, I was certain that my place for college education was in a big city, but as soon as I visited UMass Amherst, the honors community drew me in with its promise of intellectual rigor and personal support. When I announced my plan to complete the program in three years, rather than turning me away, the wonderful academic advisors—particularly Tim Lang—worked with me to make that happen.

“The breadth of opportunities available at the Honors College only grew over my time here. We had the privilege of participating in small, intensive honors courses, sharing in critical analysis, and a liberal arts education nested at the heart of a large public research institution. We had dedicated professors—leaders in their fields—whose patience deserves special mention because, knowing myself, honors students are not the simplest to deal with. Through classes, scholarships, grants, events, research conferences, publishing prospects, and more, it is clear that the honors college prioritizes the success and personal development of its students. What’s more, I have found a network of artists, athletes, educators, future scientists, engineers, mathematicians, lawyers, doctors, leaders in business and the humanities, and others who both guided me and endlessly challenged me.

“At a scholarship interview earlier this year, I was asked the question: What is power? I struggled to find an answer. My family emigrated to the U.S. from Moscow, Russia, and had to adjust to foreign ways of thinking. As a woman born to a patriarchal culture, I had difficulty feeling confident about my abilities. Luckily, my parents pushed me to seek strength through my education and always reminded me that the
mantra, “Life is hard,” can be shattered by finding joy in what you are doing. When I started at UMass, I thought that the key to finding confidence was personal success. I was wrong. I have learned just as much from my failures, fears, and ignorance. Three years ago, I was the last person who would have elected to stand up here today. In part, I have an honors public speaking course to thank for that! But the other part was all of you who persuaded me to take life a little less seriously, while still remaining a very serious student. The Honors College community, and especially my closest friends and roommates, taught me to look beyond my own small concerns.

“All of the sudden, I found the answer to the question. For me, power is the courage to move just one person to safety, or progress, or hope. Even if you cannot incite change on a grand scale, taking a small role in the cause is well worth it. Though I am a legal studies major, the Honors College has always been a second home for me. It was here that I began to develop my passion for helping people. It was also here that I had those conversations and moments of clarity that finally made me feel confident. In the residence halls, during events like ‘Pizza and Prof,’ over morning grab-and-go at Roots Café, and in honors seminars, we have interacted and collaborated with young people from all walks of life who, nevertheless, share in our collective passion for education. Together, we sunbathed on the grass, putting off that paper or exam to just take a moment and daydream about what the future would hold for us. We stayed up all night studying together, comforted each other in hardship, and celebrated each other’s triumphs. Together, we learned how to be leaders and how to live our lives with integrity.

“Today we celebrate all of you and not simply our individual achievements. We celebrate our collective success and future aspirations. These faces, to our left and our right, are the ones who got us here. I challenge each and every one of you to ask yourself what makes you feel powerful, and as you leave here today, to find a new community and continue to grow. The power to accomplish anything we set our minds to is already within us. If ever you forget that, just look how far we have come!

“As I head to law school in the fall, I look forward to the ways in which all of us will bring our own kinds of power into the world. Do not be afraid to ask for help. You were, you are, UMass Amherst Commonwealth Honors College. Thank you.”

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