

June 16, 2017

Introduction for 2017 Commencement speaker, Billie Jean King  
SESP Senior Jacob Rosenblum

I want to congratulate all of the graduates. Getting into, and graduating from, Northwestern University is no easy feat. I want to especially honor those graduates who faced significant barriers to getting here, whether it was their ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity, gender expression, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. Your achievement today is extraordinary given the obstacles you've faced in our society, and I want you to know that you are loved and valued.

I also want to thank the faculty, staff, friends, and family who stood by us and provided invaluable support to get here. I want to especially thank those who stood by us when it wasn't easy, when being our allies and advocates was a struggle. Without your support, many of us would not have been able to come to Northwestern, study what we love, and pursue our dreams.

Thank you to my own parents, who may not have expected their young son to walk around in his mom's heels and sing show tunes in the outfield at little league, but stood by me anyway. Your unwavering support for your gay son is what got me here, and I am forever grateful for your unconditional love.

I also want to thank my friends and classmates here at Northwestern for always accepting me for who I am. The unshakeable, deep connections we formed here were possible because we felt we could be ourselves with each other. And fearless activists like Billie Jean King are to thank for that.

This kind of acceptance didn't happen on its own, and it didn't start with us.

This kind of acceptance is the result of years of hard, sometimes discouraging work, by people like Billie Jean King, for equality. For acceptance of those who are different. And Ms. King, for that, I thank you. I thank you for working before I was born to set up the kind of society that would embrace me the way it has here at Northwestern. And I thank you for sticking it out even when it looked like the work was impossible, because it is thanks to you that I – and many of my fellow graduates – got here today.

Beyond being a prolific tennis player, Ms. King, you were one of the first prominent athletes to proudly represent the LGBTQI community. For everyone here who has come out since, you were – and continue to be – a trailblazer. In the fight for equal pay for all genders, you led the way, threatening to boycott the US Open in 1973 unless the women's and men's prize money was equalized. You created the Women's Tennis Association when men's tennis players formed their own union. Eight years ago, you were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom,

becoming one of the first two members of the LGBTQI community – along with Harvey Milk – to receive the nation’s highest civilian honor.

Ms. King, you were never one to back down from a fight, on or off the tennis court. Because of your tireless work, you broke down barriers for many of the Northwestern grads staring up at you right now.

The fight is far from over, and there is much more work for us to do. I am grateful to have a role model like you to guide us and join us in that fight for marginalized communities, especially now.

Everyone, please join me in welcoming Billie Jean King.