Greetings fellow graduates, faculty, parents and distinguished guests. My name is Kari Neal, and today I would like to talk to you about the bumblebee. Did you know that the bumblebee is ill-equipped for flight? The bee's hefty body is much too large for its shallow wingspan to successfully take flight. Author Thelma Wells states “According to the law of aerodynamics, it is built all wrong. Its maiden flight should have ended with a call to 911. Its species could have been named *InsectTitanicus*. No one really knows why it is able to get lift-off, but it does. And every day, millions of these doomed creatures take to the air while scientists and engineers of the world shake their heads and say, ‘How do they do that?’ I, just like the bumblebee, seem to have been made incorrectly for the task I was created to do.

In April 2012, my world as I knew it started to change. My body was plagued with extreme pelvic pain that would unexpectedly come and go throughout the day. This on-and-off again pain became a part of my daily life until October 3, 2012. On my 16th birthday, my painful pain became constant; it encompassed my body and drastically amplified. I began suffering from chronic daily headaches that increased in severity until I could no longer read. My pelvic, abdominal, and leg pain amplified to the point where the mere act of walking was nearly impossible. I absolutely dreaded having to move off of the couch. Without my dad carrying me, or pushing me in my wheelchair, I wouldn’t have been able to go anywhere. I was forced to drop out of school and unfortunately, missed 90% of my junior year. For the first few months after this drastic change in my pain, I thought I was dying. I prayed to God that if this was the case, that he would let me die quickly and with as little pain as possible. Doctors continued to tell me they had no idea what was wrong with my body and yet, that wasn’t the worst. Certain doctors yelled at me; they told me I was pretending to be sick to get attention and so I wouldn’t have to go to school. One of these uncompassionate doctors looked me in the eye and told me to get up out of my wheelchair, walk, and stop begging for attention. My world seemed to be spiraling out of control until November of 2013 when I finally received some peace of mind.

In November of 2013, I was diagnosed with a rare genetic disease called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. This disease causes the body to produce collagen, which is the glue that holds our bodies together, incorrectly. Think of it as your body being held together with a new rubber band. This rubber band can stretch, but always goes back to its original shape. My body, on the other hand, is being held together with a rubber band that has lost its elasticity. It will continue to stretch more and more and won't return to its original shape afterwards. There is no cure and treatment options are mediocre at best. This incurable syndrome became my obstacle, and it became the largest hurdle I have ever had to face. Ehlers Danlos Syndrome has forced me to teach myself how to read, write, walk, and perform daily functions in a way that will cause the least amount of pain possible. I have had to re-learn how to live.

Looking out across the audience, I can confidently say that every one of us will face changes and not all these changes are going to be positive. All of us will have our own obstacles to overcome, whether it’s sickness, losing someone we love, financial difficulties, academic difficulties, or some other hurdle. We are all going to face challenges at some point in our life. What is important is how we react to these challenges and what we take away from them. We are going to have to adapt to these obstacles. We might not be able to
reach our goals in the time and fashion we originally thought; however, we must realize that those goals need not change, just the path.

Helen Keller wrote “Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” A person who embodies that spirit is Charyl Stockwell. Charyl had a severe health condition that created many challenges in her life. One of these challenges was finding a school that would adapt and meet her educational needs. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Stockwell, created Charyl a school that would be a safe place for her, and all of us, to not only reach our academic goals, but to develop good character as well. The Stockwells have created a place where my academic journey is flexible and adapts to the health concerns I have. Charyl Stockwell Academy, Charyl’s story, and my own experience, have taught me that at the end of the day, what matters is our character and how we were able to persevere through our difficulties. This is even more important than how high our GPA is, what type of job we have, or how much money we make.

At CSPA, we are taught about the character traits from Kindergarten through graduation. These character traits are ingrained into us and help us to face our obstacles with a positive outlook. Throughout life, when you face challenges, you are going to need to have these character traits to be able to face your obstacles and successfully overcome them. The person who lives by these character traits realizes that they have no control over what happens to them; however, they do have control over how they react to their circumstances. These are the same people, who, despite great odds, rise up, and look beyond themselves, to help others and make positive contributions in their community. As I practiced in Girl Scouts, we must all “make the world a better place.”

Finally, I would like to thank the faculty at CSPA, my parents, fellow graduates and friends, for believing that in spite of the odds, I too can get lift-off just like the bumblebee. I wish to encourage all of you that despite the difficulties you may encounter, don’t give up!

“Don’t believe the lie that you cannot fly. You alone have the power to be the best at whatever you chose to “bee”!”