

Transcript from the 2021 Disability Graduation

WELCOME

Mike Venzon, Director of Student Disability Services:

I am the director of student disability services. For ease of access, I am going to provide a brief visual description. I am a bald, white male. I have the distinct pleasure of serving as MC for today's event. We are excited to have work with a dedicated group of students and staff, as well as the general support of the University of Iowa partners. For individuals who identify as disabled. We will join many other communities to allow space for, and intentional focus on students.

Before we get started, we want to take a moment to acknowledge that the University of Iowa is located on the homelands of the Chippewa, Iowa, Kickapoo, Menominee [me-NOM-mah-nee], Miami, Missouri, Omaha, Osage [O-sage], Otoe [O-toe], Ottawa, Ponca, Potawatomi [POT-a-wah-omi], Sac and Fox, Dakota/Lakota/Nakoda, Three Affiliated Tribes and Winnebago Nations. The following tribal nations, Omaha Tribe of Nebraska and Iowa, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, Sac and Fox of the Mississippi in Iowa, and Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska Nations continue to thrive in the State of Iowa and we continue to acknowledge them. As an academic institution, it is our responsibility to acknowledge the sovereignty and the traditional territories of these tribal nations, and the treaties that were used to remove these tribal nations, and the histories of dispossession that have allowed for the growth of this institution since 1847. Consistent with the University's commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, understanding the historical and current experiences of Native peoples will help inform the work we do; collectively as a university to engage in building relationships through academic scholarship, collaborative partnerships, community service, enrollment and retention efforts acknowledging our past, our present and future Native Nations.

Thank you to the Native American Council for their effort and leadership partnering with tribal nations across Iowa to create and share this acknowledgement of land and sovereignty.

We planned to host our first Disability Graduation last year, however due to COVID-19, we were only able to recognize graduates through our website. This year, through the efforts and advocacy of a small planning group of students and staff and the generous efforts of the IMU staff, we are able to host this intimate in-person event as well as recognize individuals on our website who are unable to be with us today.

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social gatherings, this in person event is more intimate – and distance by at least 6 ft – per guidelines outlined by the university, which reflect guidance from the CDC, local health department, and UI health experts, to help protect the health of our community. At today's event, you will notice that we have also included guidelines related to the requirement of wearing a mask, maintaining at least 6 ft of distance between each person, and staying home if COVID-19 symptoms are present (outside of your normal parameters, if you have an underlying health condition, which mimics symptoms of COVID-19).

As we hoped to highlight the memories and stories of those graduating to commemorate their time and accomplishments at the University of Iowa, students were given the option to attend in person, to be honored on our website, or both.

We are so proud of you!

Thank you, students, for your tenacity, flexibility, and grace throughout this process. Thank you to those who were guides and supports along the way. And a special thank you to the UI Students for Disability Advocacy & Awareness (UISDAA) and the Disability Graduation 2021 Planning Committee for your efforts to ensure we had a venue to celebrate.

During this event, we invite keynote speakers to give an address. Following words of welcome and keynote addresses, we have the honor of awarding one faculty/staff member and two graduating students with the Outstanding Disability Volunteer Leadership Award. And then, with all the anticipation built, we will have a chance to celebrate our graduates by encouraging them to the front to be recognized.

Now, it is my pleasure to introduce today's keynote speaker, Kristal Marlow Gibson.

Kristal Marlow Gibson is currently the Associate Director of the Office of Student Accountability, handling mostly sexual misconduct investigations involving students. She is moving this summer to the new Office of Institutional Equity in the Division of Equity and Inclusion and will be adding responsibilities involving staff and faculty. Kristal is both an attorney and a certified mediator. She also has worked for the University of Iowa as the Associate Ombudsperson, a Civil Rights Investigator, an adjudicator, and as the author of the On Iowa orientation modules on Academic Integrity. Before joining the University, she was the Director of Test Security at ACT, inc. and served as an attorney in the U.S. Justice Department, both as a United States Attorney criminal prosecutor and as an Honor's Program trial attorney in the Civil Division.

Please join me in welcoming Kristal Gibson!

KRISTAL MARLOW GIBSON, M.A., J.D. - KEYNOTE SPEAKER'S ADDRESS

Kristal Marlow Gibson, M.A., J.D.:

I am a white woman with glasses and mostly silver hair. And I am wearing a black pantsuit today. I would also like to describe what I see out here. Everybody looks amazing. I am so pleased that we can be here together to celebrate this exciting day of your graduation. We are together. It is great! I know when you hear my list of my jobs, I worry as I come across as a little scary. Criminal prosecutor? Test security? Many of you are even wondering why isn't someone from student accountability giving the address? Are we in trouble? You are not in trouble. I think, I am guessing, I was nominated by some students who are graduating today. They have activated me to become more involved in advocating and supporting students with a disability on this campus. I promise them, that I will continue to prod this university to do better. What lies behind that? What lies behind that list of jobs that you just heard? It is the simple fact that I am a professional listener. Not in the same way that our wonderful colleagues from the counselling services listen, but listening is fundamental to everything that I have done. I have listened to many students on this campus. Some of you, even. When I listened, I heard the stories of what you had to do in order to be a successful student at the university. To make it to this special day, graduation. We all have multiple identities, roles, and responsibilities, we juggle them in our lives.

Everyone has challenges. These layers of intersection, they are a part of life. And your experience will always be, in some ways, unique to you. But I want to highlight today and acknowledge that there is an extra burden. An extra layer that seems to be shared by the students at the University today. As a lawyer, I appreciate it that there are lots intended to protect you from discrimination. These laws are part of your life. They are the floor, that is the legal minimum. That isn't not quite enough. The University does not have enough resources to. Right here in front of you. You personally, have had to handle more than you should have to get here today. I am sorry, and I want the University to do better. Every student I have talked to, has told a story, about a difficult choice that they have had to make during their time as a student. Our campus has wonderful staff, who help with academic accommodations, or working in office we can file a complaint about the law, or a file a violation. Sometimes the actual application of those "approved accommodations" has been a struggle. You had to take that piece of paper, or that email, and you had to figure out how to advocate for yourself. You had to learn skills of persuasion, and problem-solving, even in situations where your disability made using the skills really hard for you. I am sorry, and we have got to do better. Because, each of those times, you as a student refers to make that choice, you should not have had to make it. You had to decide, whether to insist, to push back, to teach the teacher, or endless outside pressure to help you get what you are entitled to. Maybe, you had to work with your advisor, to see if you could avoid, or navigate around a class or even a particular instructor? So that you could fulfil your graduation requirements, and meet your goals. You had to decide if you had the emotional bandwidth, to even take on this conflict. You had to check and see, if this current status of your health, your particular disability and everything else going on in your lives made it so that you can take this on. Or, if you just needed to drop the class. Avoid the conflict, move on, find another way so that you can make it to your goals. It should not be that way. I want to acknowledge that. Sometimes, in that moment the right choice for you, in that time and in that situation was to just move on. That is OK. Sometimes, you push, and you insisted, and that is fine too. You had a goal. I want to celebrate with you today. You made it. You are graduating! I know, that there are many, many, amazing faculty and staff on this campus. Some of them are part of this celebration, or mentioned in the program. I want us to thank them for just a minute. Can we? Some of you may also have family, or other special people in

your lives, who supported you on this journey. We should also take a moment to thank them right? (Applause) I can say with confidence, that everyone here today knows this phrase. That which does not kill you makes you stronger. You have either said it, or somebody else has said it to you at some point on your journey to this diploma. I'm going to tell you something. I do not like that one, I really don't. Can we just agree to banish that one? For one, it should not be that way. Inner strength does not have to come from adversity. Inner strength and can come from self-confidence, knowing you're worth, demanding to be treated with dignity and respect as a whole human being. What we do when someone says that phrase, what does not kill you makes you stronger? We probably give a polite social nod, and maybe a chuckle. When I hear someone say that as a listener, I know they are sending me a message. That message is said in a socially acceptable way, the message is that they are suffering. In the future, before you toss out that little phrase, stop. Do not brush over pain, or minimize struggles. Do not ask someone to gloss over it, and maybe "Look on the bright side!" We need to all be in a better place than that. Instead of that, should we not be working to put things in a better place in the first place? We should be moving beyond an attitude of near accommodations as required by the law. And into a place of true support for success, of true equal opportunity, and for thriving. You graduates are amazing, and you can do amazing things. You have dignity, you have autonomy, you have self-determination, and you have shown incredible perseverance. We want to always respect, and celebrate that with you. This success is yours! It is your hard work, it is your efforts, and it was harder than it should have been. To those of you who are willing to join me to be activated, to be more involved as allies, to us not focus on the legal minimums anymore. Let's not just guess what our students need, to really succeed. Ask! Ask what they need. This is the part that gets skipped right? Try to do the thing. If someone is vulnerable, and willing to ask for help, we need to do the thing they ask us to do. We have to do better. You graduates are going out into the world, futures you have been preparing for and you may be tired. You may even be struggling to celebrate this huge accomplishment, because it has taken a lot out of you. Or, lucky you, you may just be reveling in the celebration. I want you to know that we are proud of you, and we cannot wait to watch what you are going to do out in the world to change it. I want to ask you something. I want to ask you to continue to be open. Open to finding those allies, for your journey. Even if your job title does not really sound

promising, there are people like me who want to listen, who are willing to do the thing, the thing that you may need some help so that you can survive and thrive. Or maybe, just here because you did it all yourself. Because, I know you all can, and will succeed and thrive despite any of the obstacles. Because, you have already done at once. Go out and do it again. Thanks. (Applause)

Mike Venzon:

Thank you, Kristal for your inspiring words. As a token of appreciation, we would like to present you with this gift.

OUTSTANDING DISABILITY VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP AWARDS

Mike Venzon:

In partnership with the 2020 Diversity Catalyst Seed Grant and the Council for Disability Awareness, the Disability Graduation Planning Committee is able to recognize incredible undergraduate and graduate students with the second annual Outstanding Disability Volunteer Leadership Awards. This year's recipients are motivated and innovative students with disabilities at the University of Iowa who are involved in disability affairs, advocacy, research, awareness, activities, and/or community building. They go above and beyond in their daily duties to exemplify disability as diversity and to move the University of Iowa towards greater accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities.

This was another challenging year for the selection committee, with so many deserving members of our campus community nominated. Though not all could be selected as finalists, we strongly believe that being nominated is itself a significant honor, highlighting the important work these individuals do in our community, and the impact they have made. You can see the complete list of this year's nominees, several of whom are here today, in your program. We would like to take a moment and recognize all those nominated this year – if you are present, feel free to wave, stand, or indicate you are here when your name is called.

Faculty/Staff

- Ken Brown

- Dana Driesen
- Kristal Marlow Gibson
- Jennifer Haylett
- Katie Hosteng
- Angie Lamb
- David McCurdy
- David Rooney
- Heidi Schmitt

Students

- Natalie Oostenbrug
- Sam Singh
- Allison Steger
- Grant Tapken

Thank you all for being exemplars in our community, and for your ongoing efforts to make the University of Iowa a place where all feel welcome.

This year, we were unable to have the physical awards available for today's ceremony, but are still excited to welcome our four award recipients to the front to accept the recognition, a certificate, a small gift, and offer any brief remarks.

Our faculty and staff award recipient this year is: **Jennifer Haylett.**

Her nominator shares, "Dr. Haylett sets a perfect example to other university professors. I have always known her to be kind, supportive, understanding, and engaging during lecture, office hours, and even as I've happened to run into her around Iowa City. She makes time for her students. She has never made me feel as though I needed to create a narrative around my disability to receive accommodations. She consistently goes above and beyond."

Congratulations, Dr. Haylett!

Dr. Haylett:

I just wanted to say a couple of things. First, I am very honored to be here today,

so thank you so much a couple of things I wanted to know. I feel very fortunate that I get to work with students. It is hands-down the best part of my job, is working with students. It is also the most rewarding part of my job. Because you leave, and we stay here. It is sad to see you leave, but it is also exciting to see. I worked with many of you, and I remember many of you. We focus on your life, activating your dreams, and your potential. Level of participation, level of involvement. Many of you left an impression. Just your strength as a student. I just want to pass that along and want to say that you should be proud of yourselves. A lot of times, during graduation will speak about the future, which is great to think about, I encourage you to just focus on the present moment. Just let this sink in and celebrate. (Applause)

Mike Venzon:

For our first student award, we are excited to announce Natalie Oostenbrug. Her nominator shares, "I want to nominate Natalie because she's truly a dedicated advocate for disabled students - and disabled people in general - and because she's a great friend. She took part in pushing for and organizing a disability graduation which we are here for today. One thing I really like about Natalie is that she doesn't just point out injustice - she also offers reasonable solutions." Congratulations, Natalie! (Applause)

Natalie Oostenbrug:

Thank you all for coming here today. I really appreciate everyone taking their time and energy to be involved in your students' lives and for showing up and for being a part of this. It was a big undertaking to make it happen but it is well worth it to see all of you here today. It just warms my heart. Thank you all very much. (Applause)

Mike Venzon:

As for the second student award, we are excited to award Sam Singh! Her nominator shares, "During her time as VP of recruitment for her sorority she made sure that those with speech and hearing disabilities were taken into account prior to rounds starting to make sure that they were seated in a part of the house that would be most helpful and accommodating for their disability. She

has always promoted diversity and exemplifies that disabilities do not have to severely impact the trajectory of your academic and extracurricular careers.”
Congratulations, Sam! (Applause)

Sam Singh:

Hi, I am Sam. I want to thank my parents and my sister because they always taught me to advocate for myself and for people who does not really have a place. I also want to thank the division for everything that they did. Constantly looking for new ways for an inclusive environment. Secondly, as a graduating senior, I am so thankful that you got to do this for us. One in four Americans has a disability and I want all of us to think about that when we go ahead to the real world. I encourage everyone to raise awareness. Just go out to the world and just show how miraculous your mights are. (Applause)

Mike Venzon:

For our third student award, we are excited to give this to Grant Tapken. His nominator shares, “Grant is very active in the community and is an advocate for individuals with disabilities on campus. He does everything he can to educate his peers and the community, while also voicing changes that need to be made to allow others to succeed.” Grant comments, “Improving the lives of the students with disabilities and think University of Iowa was behind every decision I made in this role and was something I hold my fellow board members learn from me as well.” Congratulations, Grant!

Grant Tapken:

Hello my name is Grant Tapken. For those that may be visually impaired I am a medium height male with medium light skin tone and short dark hair. I am very grateful to receive this high honor. It was one of my greatest pleasures of my college experience to work on the student advisory board to Student Disability Services. In August I was asked if I would be willing to serve and I was very grateful and said to myself why not. Through this experience on SAB, I saw the impact that we were making on the lives of people with disabilities for future generations of Hawkeyes. I cannot wait to see what the SAB will accomplish with help SDS and people like Dr. Bruno and the offices of diversity equity and inclusion. But all of the work of myself and my follow numbers would not be

possible without the hard work and dedication of David Rooney and Mike Venzon, so please give all the numbers of SAB and these two gentlemen a rounds applause as well. Thank you again for this great honor! (Applause)

Mike Venzon:

Let us give one more appreciation for all the nominees and award recipients. (Applause)

PRESENTATION OF GRADUATES

Mike Venzon:

Now we turn our attention to the main event. Celebration of our graduates. We are now going to recognize and celebrate the 2021 graduates. You can find additional information on the program. Graduates, when your name is called, please make your way to the podium.

(All Graduates were recognized.)

Let us get one more appreciation for all the graduates. (Applause) Congratulations again to all of today's graduates. It is truly a privilege to honor you today for your personal achievement.

THANK YOUS & CLOSING

We would like to formally thank the following organizations, departments, and people for their incredible effort, and support. Steven Edwards. Kristal Marlow Gibson. Brea Marcello. Natalie Oostenbrug. Allison Theresa Steger. Dr. Erin Stresow. Michael Venzon, M.Ed. Cassie Walizer, M.Ed. Center for Diversity & Enrichment (CDE). Council for Disability Awareness (CDA). Disability Graduation Planning Committee. The Division for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The Division of Student Life. Student Disability Services (SDS). University of Iowa Students for

Disability Advocacy and Awareness (UISDAA). Thank you to our interpreters and captioners for helping to make this process more accessible.

Appreciation and congratulations again to all of our graduates for your continued engagement and leadership.

And to everyone who made time today to come celebrate and honor these outstanding members of our community, thank you for joining us.

Check out the Disability Graduation website! Have a wonderful day! Go Hawks!