

MANLIUS PEBBLE HILL SCHOOL 2006 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

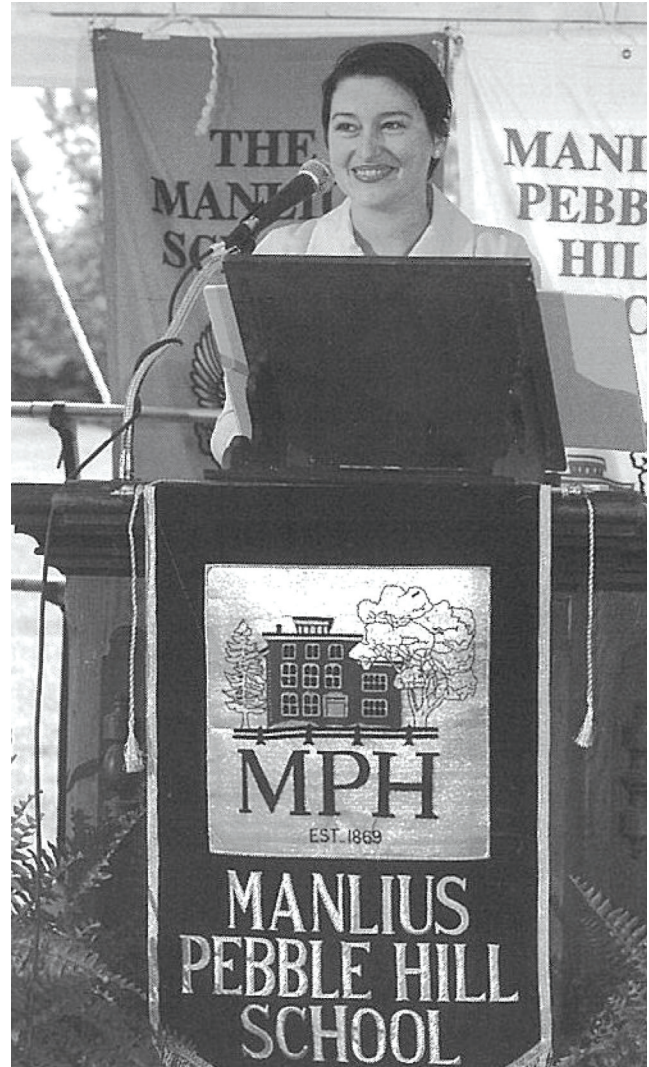
By Laurie Mezzalingua

Laurie Mezzalingua, Class of 1986, told members of Manlius Pebble Hill's Class of 2006 to let go of their fairy-tales and, instead, develop an understanding and appreciation for where they are and what they have in life. This advice was given within the context of her battle and survival of a life-threatening illness. Laurie spoke to 65 graduates who received diplomas during the June 4 ceremony on campus. The following is an excerpt from her speech.

It's been a long 20 years for me since I sat here in 1986. I loved my high school years. I got a great education from Manlius Pebble Hill, in the classroom and on the soccer field. I say that because everywhere we went as students, MPH took it as an opportunity to grow us in stature and in confidence. Education here is used as a tool to develop our ability to apply what we know to our everyday life. I left MPH maintaining a healthy attitude, sense of humor, and a love for life. And those were the skills that didn't bring success, but did guarantee happiness, wellness, patience, and tolerance.

Today, my merit and my pedestal, where I am in my life, stems from the fact that I continue to survive a life-threatening illness. Eleven years out of high school, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and for the past eight and a half years it dominated my career, changed my relationships, overshadowed my confidence, empowered my faith in God, and changed forever my future plans. When the disease recurred in my bones and liver, I was given a time frame of less than three years. That is when my true education began.

After graduation from MPH, I went on to Boston University where I failed physics three times and was on probation my freshman year for having a grade point average below 1.0. I



couldn't get ahead of the curve; for the first two years I was barely passing tests and papers. My parents used to get so upset—thinking I was not serious, too social, that I didn't care, or worse, didn't appreciate the education they worked so hard to give me. Maybe I didn't want it for myself. Maybe the school was too hard. My reply was always, "Who cares, I'm having fun." You know how parents respond to that statement? "I CARE!" Truly, I could not have cared less. Somehow I didn't think it mattered. And, what galled everyone was that it didn't kill my zest for life!

Years later, I didn't know I would be delivered blow after blow of difficult news regarding my health and the treatments I would have to undergo in order to save my own life. Talk about failing tests, for three years straight every x-ray, CAT scan, and MRI showed progression of disease in my body. I distinctly remember sitting in an infusion lab at a cancer center watching a nurse put a needle the width of a toothpick into my chest for chemotherapy. I looked at my mother, whose eyes masked worry and fear, and what popped out of my mouth? "Who cares! I am still having fun." In college it was a brush-off, a foolish statement, now it was looked upon as a good attitude! Now it's called courageous!

I think the best thing I ever did for myself was give up on my dreams. I let go of my fairy-tale. Determining who we are and where our place in life lies is really not a dream but an understanding, an acceptance, and a thorough appreciation for all that we have. Dreams are meant for nighttime when your eyes are closed. I realize this sounds harsh, because the expression "don't give up on your dreams" is meant as a positive and powerful statement to live by, but it's dangerous to bind yourself to a plan you made early on. I would like to say, don't get demoralized. Don't think that you can't do what other people can. And don't ever underestimate your potential.

I never thought I would be invited to give a commencement speech not for success in business or politics, but for simply being courageous. I never thought my different and difficult challenges in life would be rewarding, that I would meet incredible, imaginative people who fought for their lives and lost. I never realized that life has a hard side and a sweet side. I never said goodbye and never looked back when I let go of my dreams. With your family's guidance and the wonderful friendships you've made, you have every chance of making a great success of your lives. Whether you feel you are prepared or not really doesn't matter. You are prepared. If you are different than others, celebrate it openly. If your faith in God makes people think you're nuts, be a wacko. This is the beginning of you living your life by its own



design. And, if you have to dye your hair blue to do it, then you must do it! Whether you are a professor or a cashier, remember that every type of work has its own dignity. It doesn't matter how high you rise in the world's estimation as long as you don't get above yourself. A good life will be a rich one, though not necessarily in monetary terms. It will be one that is rich in friendships, experiences, and adventures. It will be one where you give instead of take.

Today you have shown us all and yourselves how far you have progressed and what you have achieved. Today all the worries and fears have proven unfounded. I wish you great conviction in your life. I wish you great joy in your lives, not great grades. I hope you will have the courage to deal with sadness that is a part of every life. And I hope you can keep the same happiness, pride, and joy on those days too.

My life hasn't always been easy, but it has been fun. My fears and my failure didn't run or ruin my life. I've learned how exhilarating it can be to overcome worries. You don't see faces much happier than people winning gold medals. And you know why they are so happy? Relief. I hesitate mentioning quotes by famous people, but there is a line from a Leonard Cohen song that paved the way for my many good days in bad times. "There is a crack in everything," he says, "that's how the light gets in."

I have been humbled today by being asked to be your commencement speaker and will treasure this time you gave me for the rest of my life. Thank you and God bless you and your wonderful families who have supported you in every way.

Class of 2006, have fun!