

Good evening graduates, faculty, family, friends, and special guests. My name is Grace Heukshorst and It is an incredible honour to stand here tonight as the valedictorian for the Dalhousie Dentistry Class of 2026.

Writing this speech has not been easy. Not because I had nothing to say, but because I had far too much, I wanted to say.

Tonight, though, all of us are here for the same reason: to celebrate. To celebrate making it through dental school.

To celebrate the people who helped get us here. To look ahead at everything waiting for us, while also taking a moment to look back at the chapter we are leaving behind.

So, before anything else, I want to start by saying this **to my fellow graduates: well done. Truly.**

Every single person sitting here tonight worked unbelievably hard to get here, and you should all be incredibly proud of yourselves.

And because tonight is about celebrating the journey just as much as the destination, I thought the best thing I could do was remind us of what these last four years looked like.

When we started dental school in the fall of 2022, most of us had absolutely no idea what we were doing. I certainly didn't.

During one of our very first lectures in sim lab, Dr. Seth started talking about burs, and I distinctly remember sitting there thinking, "What's a bur?"

That pretty much sums up first year.

We arrived bright-eyed and deeply confused. Orientation week still felt light back then — full of activities and new friendships.

Soon enough, anatomy started. We climbed fourteen flights of stairs to the lab because the elevator was seemingly never working.

We spent months learning the lower body before finally reaching head and neck anatomy — only to realize Dr. Robertson expected us to already actually know it.

September 6th, 2022, was the first day we drilled on the block in sim lab— essentially a plastic colouring book for future dentists learning how to use a handpiece.

Tuesday restorative and Friday occlusion labs quickly became the center of our lives. One of my favorite first-year memories was getting sat beside Ahmed in occlusion lab — the big brother I never asked for.

Back then, we could still socialize while absolutely destroying plastic teeth and repeatedly going back to Carol and Natasha for “just one more” tooth. We also learned about the legendary T-ball burnisher from Dr. Garland and received what may have been the greatest compliment available from Dr. Knecktel:

“Is it good? No. But will it work for you? Yes.”

Honestly, that sentence carried some of us through all four years. We survived histology, physiology, biochem, pharmacology and more — all of which everyone told us would matter for boards, though at the time boards felt fake and impossibly far away.

And speaking of surviving, somehow Rylan also survived the Great Scooter Accident of first year.

We got our first loupes and suddenly started feeling like actual dentists.

We spent weekends in sim lab voluntarily, which in hindsight feels like deeply concerning behavior. At one point I brought Sobeys fortune cookies to share to boost morale, which says a lot about where we were mentally.

But somewhere between late nights at Alehouse, Oral-B toothbrush giveaways, and taking our first radiographs on the Dexter heads, something shifted. Classmates became friends, and over that first year, strangers became the people we would spend the next four years growing up beside.

And most importantly... **we won the turkey drive.**

By 2nd year, we had gained just enough confidence to become a danger to ourselves and others.

The first major tragedy of second year was the death of the beloved postman-blue MOBB scrubs. In their place came sleek black FIGS scrubs that destroyed our student lines of credit while somehow making us look far more competent than we actually were.

Second year was also when things became much more hands-on. We started practicing injections on each other for the first time and learned very quickly that trust within our class was either incredibly strong or deeply misplaced.

That year also brought new classmates into our lives as the QP and IMU students joined our class. Many of them had already been practicing dentists and specialists in other countries, yet somehow, they were still humble enough to watch the rest of us panic over tyodont teeth. It honestly feels impossible to imagine our class without them now, and some of those people became my very best friends.

Second year also introduced us to our first denture patients with Dr. Cook. We quickly learned dentures require a shocking number of appointments and complete faith in Dr. Loney's YouTube videos. We also saw our first exam and debridement patients in clinic—actual human beings who trusted us with their oral health even though some of us still struggled to identify the working end of a scaler.

Somewhere along the way, Jawad became the unofficial face of our case presentations as he was photoshopped into every possible version of the patient — child, woman, elderly man, you name it. I'm not sure Dr. Doucette was always fully awake during those presentations, but the rest of us definitely were.

We survived the total solar eclipse by sharing what felt like a single pair of eclipse glasses amongst the group. We had the Prosth Olympics, where everyone showed up in ridiculous costumes with an alarming amount of team spirit. Days like that reminded you why you loved dental school in the first place.

Sam welcomed her beautiful baby Navisha into the world. Chandler's daughter Lennie became a big sister when baby Hudson arrived weighing a completely unreasonable 8 pounds 8 ounces.

By second year, dental school no longer felt quite so unfamiliar. We were still stressed, but we were becoming more capable. More confident. More connected.

And once again, most importantly... **we won the turkey drive.**

By third year, we weren't just practicing on plastic teeth anymore. We had our own patients, schedules and responsibilities.

Third year was the year we learned how much dentistry actually involves things that are NOT dentistry. We learned how to manage patients, write notes, work with labs, and politely call patients who definitely forgot they had an appointment with us.

And then came the CDCP.

For the families and friends here tonight, the Canadian Dental Care Plan was wonderful for many patients... and emotionally devastating for dental students.

Patients slowly began realizing that if insurance would cover treatment elsewhere, they no longer had to let stressed students work on them for a reduced fee. Honestly, I don't blame them.

We started endo with Dr. Mello on long Wednesday afternoons that felt like psychological warfare. There were voids in gutta percha, and enough fire alarms interrupting us each week to make all of us slightly superstitious.

And as if Wednesdays were not already stressful enough, we also had prosthodontics with Dr. Michaud — including the infamous 3-unit bridge prep and provisional summative. I have never seen a room full of adults so unwell over three plastic teeth.

Around the same time, Dr. Wright's ten-question perio quizzes worth ten percent of our grade happened. Some people are honestly still recovering from those quizzes.

We also began rotations that year — oral surg, oral path, emerge, grad perio, North End, North Preston, Harbourview, and week-long rotations at both the VG and the IWK; which pushed us out of our comfort zones.

And despite how hard third year was, it was also the year many of us found our people.

I was lucky enough to be part of what was objectively the greatest third-year clinic group of all time. We had matching scrub caps, and under Dr. Hunter's leadership, we proudly became known as the Baby Yodas. Long live SGP B.

In between all of this we started becoming real clinicians.

And naturally... **we still won the turkey drive.**

And then fourth year arrived.

Or more accurately, year 3.5: Summer clinic was a strange limbo where the previous fourth years were suddenly gone and, with absolute horror, we realized we were now the people supposed to know what we were doing.

Fourth year also marked the official death of paper charts. In exchange, we were gifted approximately seventeen thousand YubiKeys, which somehow managed to make Group C, already the slowest clinic group, even slower.

But we started fourth year strong.

At the camping trip, we honored the memory of the old postman-blue MOBB scrubs the only appropriate way possible: by completely desecrating them for costume purposes. Chandler's pink speedo is unfortunately burned into my memory forever.

Fourth year also gave us the softball tournament, where we dominated even though at least half the team had spent lunch break at the Stillwell beer garden.

Clinic became both more stressful and more normal at the same time as we juggled requirements, lab work, board prep, and figuring out life after dental school. Somewhere in the middle of all that, Jimmy's Tim Hortons runs became genuine emotional support. Your morning might have been terrible, but Jimmy was coming back with coffee, and that made everything better.

And then there were boards. We spent months spiraling over prescription writing only for it to end up being the easiest part of the exam. But, despite the collective psychological state of our class — we passed!

The senior lab remained in a constant state of disaster. Officially, we blamed the third years. Unofficially, the security camera I installed confirmed our suspicions.

But more than anything, fourth year moved impossibly fast. So much of this year was spent focused on the next thing: the next requirement, the next exam, the next patient, the next step after graduation. It became easy to forget that these were the moments we were going to miss someday.

And I think that's the hardest part of all of this. It's knowing that this strange little world we built together is coming to an end. Somehow, over four years, this class became a family.

And through every stressful, exhausting, hilarious year of it...

We still won the turkey drive.

Looking back now, I realize dental school gave us far more than clinical skills or degrees. It changed us as people.

One of the questions I was asked during my dental school interview was: “What makes a great dentist?” I don’t remember my exact answer, but I remember saying that great dentists never stop learning.

And I still believe that. Dentistry demands lifelong learning as it constantly evolves, and our patients trust us to continue growing long after graduation.

But after four years here, I think I would add something else to that answer now.

I think success in dentistry — and honestly in life — is ultimately defined by character.

Character means choosing honesty over ego, integrity over convenience, and compassion even on the days when simply getting through feels hard. Because when we leave this room and walk into practice, our competence will be assumed. We have worked incredibly hard to earn that trust.

But what patients will remember most is not always the technical details of the dentistry we provided. They will remember whether we treated them with dignity when they were embarrassed, anxious, or afraid. Whether we listened. Whether we showed compassion on the days it would have been easier not to.

Dentistry is technical and demanding work, but at its core, it is also profoundly human work— and we have the privilege not only of treating teeth, but of making people feel cared for.

And I think that is where character matters most.

Sitting here tonight, it is easy to focus on accomplishments: the awards, passing boards, surviving competencies, finally pretending to understand Axium. And those things matter.

But they are not the whole story.

Because life is not just a collection of accomplishments. It is a collection of relationships. And at the end of the day, people are not remembered nearly as much for what they achieved, as they are for who they chose to be.

My mom always used to tell me that some people make the world a better place just by being in it. Looking around this room tonight, I know that is true of this class.

And now, as we graduate, we have the privilege of taking that even further — of making the world a better place not only by who we are, but by what we can do.

I truly believe this class will leave a mark far beyond dentistry. And I think our greatest impact will never just come from the dentistry *we do*, but from the people *we become* while doing it.

After four years together, one thing becomes very clear: none of us got to this moment alone. So, I want to thank the many people who helped carry us to this day.

First, I would like to thank our **graduation planning committee** — Kait, Vy, Minna, Jinyoung, Jade, and myself — for all the work that went into organizing this evening. More importantly, I want to thank Kathy MacFarlane, who guided all of us through this planning process with incredible patience and organization.

Thank you as well to our **incredible sponsors**, for helping make this evening possible.

I would also like to take a moment to thank the incredible faculty, instructors, and staff who helped shape our experience over these past four years.

To our **instructors** — thank you for your guidance, mentorship, and for helping us grow into capable and compassionate dentists.

I would especially like to recognize our small group practice leaders — Dr. Champoux, Dr. Power, Dr. Sarah, and Dr. Prindle. Thank you for mentoring us not only as students, but as future colleagues and professionals. Your impact on this class extends *far* beyond clinical dentistry.

I would also like to recognize the **incredible staff** who kept this school running every day.

To the **dental assistants**: Thank you for helping us through every step of clinic and somehow keeping us functioning. Thank you as well to our administrative staff, the dental lab, MDR, dispensary teams, dental stores, building services, and all the behind-the-scenes teams.

So much of what we do depended on all of you, often in ways we probably did not fully appreciate until now.

And finally, to our **families, partners, friends, and loved ones** — thank you.

Thank you for believing in us long before we believed in ourselves, thank you for celebrating our victories, supporting us through setbacks, and reminding us of who we were outside of dentistry. These past four years demanded a great deal not only from us, but from the people who loved us too. We would not be here tonight without your patience, your sacrifices, and your unwavering support every step of the way.

I also want to personally thank **my family** — especially my mom and dad. First of all, I am not entirely convinced I could have graduated dental school without my mom's crowns. So, thank you, Mom, for both the emotional support and the crown preps. But truly, there are not enough words to thank my parents for everything they sacrificed to get me to this moment.

Dad, thank you for teaching me what hard work and dedication look like. Mom, thank you for loving and supporting all five of us so endlessly.

I would not be the person I am today without your love, your sacrifices, and your belief in me long before dentistry was ever part of my life. I hope you both know that this accomplishment is just as much yours -- as it is mine.

And finally, to **my classmates** — thank you.

I hope years from now we still meet up as alumni (see everyone at the 5-year reunion in 2031!) and immediately fall back into laughing like no time has passed — reminiscing about parties at Jimmy's, 6 a.m. mornings in Tupper, and I hope Jared has finally kicked his Monster Energy addiction. And honestly, I hope our class Facebook chat never changes either. I hope it's always filled with birthday messages, life updates, and little reminders that no matter where we end up, we're still cheering each other on.

People always ask whether we would do dental school all over again. And honestly? Absolutely not. I barely survived it the first time. But what I would choose again, every single time, is getting to do it with all of you.

I am incredibly proud of all of you!

Not just for becoming dentists, but for the people you became along the way.

I cannot wait to see the lives you build, the people you help, and the impact this class leaves on the world. I love you all.

Congratulations to the Dalhousie Dentistry Class of 2026