

Good afternoon, graduates, families, friends, faculty, staff, and honoured guests.

And to the graduates of the Faculty of Dentistry: congratulations. You have done it.

You have made it through the coursework, the clinics, the long hours, the careful hands, the aching backs, the charting, the patient conversations, the moments when you knew exactly what you were doing, and the moments when you wondered whether everyone else knew something you did not.

And today, you cross this stage as dentists and dental hygienists: health professionals entrusted with skill, judgment, care, and trust.

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I have been thinking lately about Dana Evans, the charge nurse in The Pitt.

For those of you who have not watched The Pitt, Dana is not there for drama. She is not sentimental. She is practical, direct, funny, tired in the way only health-care people can be tired, and deeply, unmistakably committed. She sees the room.

She knows who is struggling. She knows who needs to be pushed, who needs to be protected, who needs a word of encouragement, and who needs someone to simply get on with it.

Critics and viewers have responded to Dana because she is tough and tender: the person who relentlessly keeps care moving, and the person who reminds us that health-care workers are human.

And that is what makes Dana such a compelling figure for a graduation day.

Because every health profession has its public story and its private truth.

The public story is noble. You help people. You relieve pain. You restore health. You make lives better.

And that story is true.

And the private truth is that the work is not always easy. There are hard days. There are anxious patients, complicated cases, full schedules, imperfect systems, tired teams, and moments when the thing you most need is a deep breath and the five quiet minutes that you may not get.

That is true in an emergency department; and it is true in the dental professions.

Dentistry is intimate work. It asks people to trust you when they may feel vulnerable, embarrassed, afraid, or in pain. It asks you to combine precision with patience. It asks you to bring science, technique, communication, steadiness, and compassion into a space where the patient may remember not only what you did, but how you made them feel.

That is a profound responsibility. And a profound privilege. At Dalhousie, the Faculty of Dentistry has been preparing people for that responsibility for more than a century.

When this Faculty was established in 1912, some people believed that creating a dental school on the East Coast would be “quite impossible.” And yet, here you are — graduating from a Faculty that became the first dental school in Canada to be fully integrated into a university, one of the earliest to graduate women, and a Faculty that has helped shape dental education and oral health care across this region and beyond.

Long ago, a Dalhousie Dental Journal editorial urged the profession never to “ignore the social problems of the community.” It imagined oral health care connected to public health, education, nutrition, psychology, medicine, and community life.

That vision continues in the work of this Faculty today: in the GAP Clinic, which supports new immigrants and refugees; in the North End Community Clinic; in outreach clinics in schools; and in the everyday work of students, faculty, staff, and alumni who understand that oral health is health.

That is excellence rooted in place. That is a rising tide.

And that is the work I hope you will continue as you shape your own practices and paths.

One of our compass bearings at Dalhousie is that leadership is an act of service. I cannot think of a better profession than yours to make that idea real.

Because leadership in dentistry will not always look like standing at a podium or holding a fancy title. Sometimes it will look like staying calm with a frightened child, or explaining something clearly to a patient who has been afraid to ask, or noticing that someone is ashamed and choosing not to add to that shame, or helping a colleague through a difficult day.

Sometimes it will look like getting up the next morning and doing the work again.

Because despite the inevitable hard days, every day brings another invitation to make a difference in someone's life. Not always in a grand way. Sometimes in a small, almost invisible way. A moment of kindness. A steady hand. A clear explanation. A bit of humour. A refusal to rush past someone's humanity.

That is what you have signed up for. You have signed up for work that matters.

I hope you remember and are proud of that.

I know your families are proud. Because the degree you're receiving today is evidence of what others have seen in you: discipline, intelligence, resilience, compassion, and the capacity to be trusted.

And so, graduates, maybe that is where Dana Evans leaves us. Not with a grand speech. Not with sentimentality. Not with the promise that every day will be easy.

But with something more useful.

Take a breath. Find the humanity in the room. And then get to work.

Congratulations to the Faculty of Dentistry Class of 2026.