

Marinda Li Wu (PhD, 1976, Drago)
2012 Convocation Speech

Chemistry faculty, parents, families, friends, and especially, our honored chemistry graduates,

How wonderful and exciting it is to be here today to share with you this truly special occasion!

This is actually a homecoming for me because I am a proud graduate of this great institution. I received my Ph.D. in Inorganic Chemistry here 36 years ago, and I am both thrilled and honored to be back.

Today is also special because it is Mother's Day so I want to take a moment to thank all the mothers here today. We ALL THANK YOU from the bottom of our hearts for all you have done! Without you, our mothers, none of this would be possible.

All you Moms out there, please wave. Let's give our mothers a big hand!

To our graduates, CONGRATULATIONS on earning your degree in Chemistry from the University of Illinois! This distinguished institution has long been a world renowned leader at educating our future chemists. I've always been proud to be a chemist, and especially proud to have received my Ph.D. from here.

Indeed, I LOVE chemistry and the broad impact we chemists

can have on improving the quality of life. If you think about it, there are few professions that can have as great and POSITIVE an impact on human life as CHEMISTRY—on health, food, energy, the environment and so much more!

As just one example, when I was a grad student here in the 1970's, the Chemistry Dept. Chair was Herb Gutowsky, a pioneer in NMR (nuclear magnetic resonance) which is being used by chemists for structure determination every day. It also made possible the development of MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) so commonly used today in medicine and invented by the Nobel Laureate Paul Lauterbur, also from this great university.

It's exciting for you to be graduating with a degree in chemistry today because I am certain that CHEMISTRY and chemists will play a critical role in helping to solve many of our world's greatest challenges.

Some of you will go on to graduate school or a postdoc. Some into industry. Others into academia. And still others, into various alternative careers. **But this is KEY: discover what you are passionate about—and follow that passion!**

Let me share how my own dear mother, who is now over 92, has always inspired me to follow *my* passions and do *my* best.

My mother's role model—and that of MANY women scientists—was Marie Curie, the first woman to win a Nobel Prize and still the only person to win two in different sciences—first in physics in 1903, and later in chemistry in

1911. In fact, the 100th anniversary of Marie Curie's Nobel Prize in Chemistry was celebrated around the world as part of the International Year of Chemistry last year.

Inspired by Marie Curie, my courageous mother left China in 1947 to pursue her dream of graduate studies here at the University of Illinois. Back in those days, it took two weeks by boat to get to America. In fact, as a young foreign student, my mother actually rented a room from Mrs. Noyes, the widow of the famous William Albert Noyes of Noyes Lab.

My mother's courage instilled in me the same passion to seek the best education I could to prepare me for my career.

After graduating from college, I was trying to decide between UC Berkeley and the University of Illinois for graduate school. I ended up choosing to come here so I could do research for a famous professor in Inorganic Chemistry.

Imagine how shocked I was to learn from older graduate students at the new student orientation that the professor I wanted to work for did not take women! Everyone told me it was not possible to join that research group. But I wouldn't take no for an answer. I had to follow my passion, and I was lucky that the Department offered me a three year fellowship.

So, in the end I was able to join this famous professor's research group of over 20 guys. I graduated as the 65th Ph.D. from my professor's group, but only his second woman. The first was the wife of my undergraduate research advisor. That's why I had no idea that this famous professor hadn't

taken women for so many years.

I am glad that some things have improved for young women pursuing careers in chemistry today! Now as a mother myself of a wonderful daughter and son, I TOO have encouraged my children to follow their passions and do their BEST. My favorite philosopher is Confucius, who lived over 2,000 years ago. How wise he was when he said, **“Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life”** and **“Wherever you go, go with all your heart.”**

After earning my Ph.D., I was accepted for a couple of good post-docs but started getting great offers from major chemical companies across the country. To me, working in industry sounded quite exciting, so I chose to join Dow Chemical. I enjoyed a wonderful and varied career there, following my interests as they evolved for almost 20 years—from basic and applied research to leadership roles and working with sales & marketing.

However, in the early 1990's, Dow decided to shut down its Western Research center. Because my husband is not a chemist and I am part of a dual career couple, I chose to stay in the San Francisco Bay Area rather than transfer to Midland, MI.

What at first seemed like a challenge turned into a real opportunity. Rather than lament Dow's closing, I chose to focus the second half of my career in Small Business and Entrepreneurship, working as a polymer chemist for a small company of about a hundred people, and later starting and

running my own business called "**Science is Fun!**", teaching classes and summer camps to introduce young students to the excitement and fun of science.

Because of my **desire to make a difference and give back to my profession**, I have been passionate these past 20 years in public outreach to promote **science education** and **science literacy**. As part of my professional commitment, I stay active in the ACS -- the American Chemical Society.

In order to get to where you want on your personal journey, it's SO important to **have confidence and believe in yourself**. Doing so CAN enable you to **overcome SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE challenges and barriers!** This certainly helped me to get elected as the **first Asian American**, and only the **8th woman** President in the 135 year history of ACS, the largest scientific society in the world. It is a great honor to have this responsibility.

We often hear that this is a challenging time for our chemistry profession with many manufacturing, and now even research, jobs moving overseas. But I believe that we CAN **turn these challenges we face into opportunities!**

Both chemistry and science have become increasingly global, and opportunities abound—both domestic and abroad—if you are willing to seek them out. Moreover, the increasing **interdisciplinary** nature of R&D means that chemists can help solve even greater challenges, with broader training and teamwork.

With your training in chemistry and ability to solve problems and learn new skills, you can move into **all sorts of jobs**, not only traditional and exciting careers in science, in research and teaching, but also nontraditional—from sales & marketing to **technology transfer and patent work** to management and entrepreneurship. You are well-equipped to **follow your passion and your dreams**.

With this degree in chemistry, I hope that each of you will also consider becoming **good ambassadors for science**, even if you ultimately choose careers outside of science. Please help the general public and our elected officials understand the value and impact of science. It is EXTREMELY important for this country to have **more leaders with an appreciation of science to make BETTER and informed policy decisions** in the increasingly technology driven world we live in today.

Your commencement today is exactly that – a commencement, a beginning, a first step, but a **big** step—towards **improving people's lives** through the **transforming** power of chemistry.