

**Student Commencement Address**  
**University of the Pacific, Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry**  
**Masonic Auditorium, San Francisco, California**  
**June 18, 2023**

**Dr. Caroline Chou**  
**DDS Class of 2023**

Good afternoon fellow classmates, faculty, administrators, staff, family, and friends, and Dugoni School Family. My name is Caroline Chou and it is an honor to be with you here today.

Class of 2023, we did it! Do you remember how we started our very first quarter of dental school during the peak of the COVID pandemic? We were split into odds and evens during Sim Lab, and attended zoom lectures (which I may have fallen asleep in here and there). Do you remember how due to social distancing, our seats were arranged with a 6 ft space between each other?

While we were focused on developing our hand skills as dentists, we were also learning to adapt to a new environment. We were worried about the health and safety of ourselves and our loved ones. Needless to say, we started dental school during one of the most difficult times in this century and I do not want to undermine the isolation, grief, and uncertainty of that period. However, I also don't want to overlook the strength and perseverance it has taken for us to get through that period, together.

Let me be completely honest with you. One month into dental school, I was struggling. I remember thinking to myself, will I always feel like this? How do I get better? And most importantly, how would this place *ever* feel like home to me?

Being so far away from home in Taiwan, I yearned for a community of people, and I strived to find a home away from home. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines "home" as "the house in which a person or family lives." But to me, it is much more than a physical structure. It is a feeling of warmth, togetherness, unity, and comfort. To me, it is our Dugoni School family.

Over time, I began to find a home here at our school. I started to put faces to the names I saw on the zoom screen. I formed friendships and connections with my peers and mentors. And I finally summoned up the courage to ask others for help, and they did not only just help me – they also uplifted me, welcomed me, held space for me, and embraced me with open arms.

To all of you who are in this room with me right now, thank you, as you have made the Dugoni School a *home* for me.

Class of 2023, you all are some of the kindest people I have ever met. You have helped me through my toughest times, and celebrated my happiest times with me. You have studied with me into the peak hours of the night, and gave me words of encouragement before an exam. You patiently explained concepts to me from lectures I didn't quite grasp yet, and helped me in clinic as we grew to become the clinicians that we are today. Together, we have all laughed and cried and stressed and smiled and I wouldn't have rather done it with anyone else.

And although today is celebrating us, graduates, I also want to talk about the unsung heroes in our lives who keep our Dugoni home going:

Our dean, Dr. Nadershahi, who leads our school with humanism and purpose.

Our Group Practice Leaders, who work so hard to make sure that we make it to this very day, graduation day.

Our faculty, who work so diligently with us in the sim lab and clinic to help us grow as clinicians.

Our group practice and patient care coordinators, schedulers, custodians, security guards, building ops, dispensary team, IT help desk, photographers, student affairs, diversity, and admissions office.

Our patients, every single one of them, for having faith in us to be their providers. It is a privilege to care for them and something we don't ever take for granted.

And finally, our families, friends, and loved ones. I kindly ask you now to stand up and wave to your loved ones, whether they are here with us today or streaming you on YouTube from miles away. I am looking at you 媽媽 (mom) 爸爸 (dad) for giving me the opportunity of a lifetime to study in America, and for flying 6,524 miles across the Pacific Ocean to celebrate with me today! You are my forever home.

Closing this chapter is so bittersweet to me. But one thing I know is that I will always have a home here. Dugoni School family, you have taught me not just dentistry, but also family, diversity, and community. We have helped each other grow in so many ways. As our former dean and beloved namesake Dr. Arthur A. Dugoni says, "At Pacific we grow people, and along the way they become doctors." It all makes sense to me now. I have learned so many things these three years, and who we are today is a mosaic of the many people who have made a beautiful and touching impact on our lives.

To close off, allow me to share one of the most valuable things I learned during my time here. This is something my group practice leader, role model, and lifelong mentor Dr. Sandy McLaren always tells me. *You are always much more capable than you think you are.* She was absolutely right. I believe it now. Thank you, Dr. McLaren, for your patience and loving kindness to me.

And thank you again, Dugoni School family and my own family, for always believing in me and never giving up on me.

Today is the day that our dreams of becoming an endodontist, orthodontist, dental hygienist, and dentist have come true. As we step into the future, I encourage you to keep chasing whatever else it is that makes you smile a little bigger, live a little fuller, and feel closer to home, however you define it.

With our passion, hard work, dedication, and support for one another, we did it.

Congratulations, DDS, IDS, Endo, Ortho, AEGD, and Dental Hygiene Class of 2023!