I arrived at Boston College nearly 50 years ago – and under great protest! I had literally complained to my parents for the entire 5 hour drive from our home in Paterson, NJ to Boston College in Chestnut Hill, MA. Why was I complaining? I had wanted to attend the local 3 year hospital nursing school with all my high school friends. I did not want to leave my comfort zone. My mother, on the other hand, had what I considered to be this “ridiculous” notion that the future of nursing lay in acquiring a Baccalaureate degree. I just couldn’t understand her thinking. She insisted that if I wanted to become a nurse, I would do so by way of a 4 year collegiate program. And . . . she had added . . . “the experience would broaden my horizons” . . . I didn’t want my horizons broadened! And thus, I found myself at the doorsteps of Boston College, having extracted a promise from my parents that I could return home in 6 weeks if I was unhappy. After approximately 6 hours . . . I never looked back.

You all arrived at Boston College with exceptional talents and gifts. These past 4 years have seen the development and nurturing of those gifts. Your talents and gifts have been, and will continue to be, translated into Ignatian tools for life. Ignatian tools for life are based on the teachings of St Ignatius; “Men and Women for Others”, “Caring for the whole person”, and “Ever to Excel” to name 3 ideals. They are, in essence, a way to live more fully in community with the people that surround you. Even though you have completed the academic and clinical requirements for your nursing degree, you are only just beginning to utilize these tools. These Ignatian tools will truly be for you, as they have been for me, the “Wind Beneath Your Wings” as you embark on your professional and personal lives. The Ignatian ideal of “Men and Women for Others” is one of the most basic yet profound principles of the Jesuit community. Where is this ideal more evident than in the nursing profession?
I have been a giver and a recipient of “Men and Women for Others” in a host of different ways over the course of my nursing career. I graduated in 1966 and became a member of the Jesuit Volunteer Corp in Jamaica, West Indies. I was surrounded by numerous daily examples of Men and Women for Others, but one story stays with me. I had come in contact with a ten year old girl who had lost an eye in a kerosene lamp accident. She had arrived at my clinic one morning and shyly asked if I had any plastic eyes in my medicine cabinet. If I did, could she have one please, and she would work in my office for it. Well, I spent the next 6 months trying to procure an artificial eye… (since I didn’t have one in my cabinet). My little friend, Pauline (who was one of 12 children) and I, took numerous 2 hour Jeep trips to University Hospital, working our way through mounds of paperwork, examinations and fittings. Finally, one glorious day, near the end of my year long stay, a new artificial eye was bestowed upon Pauline. When she gazed at her new self in the mirror, the look of radiant wonder and pleasure she displayed, can still bring a smile to my face today – 45 years later!

But the second half of that “Men and Women for Others” story occurred when that family of 14, who lived in a tin shack with no running water, prepared a thank you feast of fish and rice for me. We all sat on a dirt floor with straw mats in front of us for the fish and rice feast that they had obviously worked hard and sacrificed greatly to put together. And when we sat to eat – they each sat and ate a bowl of rice, while proudly watching me eat my rice and the one and only fish they could afford. I wonder who was the greater recipient of Men and Women for Others that time in Jamaica – so many years ago.

Another source of the “Wind beneath my Wings” is the Ignatian ideal of “cura personalis” – “to care for the whole person”. Caring for the whole person is the essence of what we were taught at Boston College; it is the very heart of our Core Curriculum. To care for the whole person is truly both the noun and the verb of Nursing, and BC nursing in particular. “Cura Personalis” is the essential philosophy and belief that motivates and enables us to think critically, to feel emotionally, to perform physically and to care for the patient and their families in totality. This is not without it’s challenges and often requires a balance of “the head and the heart”, and that means both yours and the patient’s.
I can recall a day a few years ago, while at work in the Neurological Intensive Care Unit of Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in NYC, receiving an emergency rescue call. One of our senior nurses’ husbands (a NYC Fire Chief) had just suffered a cardiac arrest at his gym. He was coming to us via ambulance and we would emergently institute life saving measures. One of our unit’s specialties is to place the patient who has suffered a cardiac arrest into a state of significant hypothermia to protect their brain…. I was to be his receiving nurse. We rapidly prepared a room for him that would have every possible medical technological advantage for someone so critically ill. When he rolled in the door, he went on to have 3 more cardiac arrests, requiring many hours of intensive treatment and coordinated team work. Simultaneously, these necessary medical interventions were being paralleled by the emotional upheaval the patient’s wife (my co-worker and friend) was experiencing. I could not help but think how traumatic it must be for her to be on the caregiving side of the bed one day, and then experience the helpless fear of suddenly being thrust to the other side of the bed the next day. She was devastated at this horrific event. She was trying to make medical decisions as his nurse-wife, and explain the situation to her 2 daughters as a nurse-mom. She and they needed both emotional support, and the reassurance that expert medical care was being rendered. It will always remain to me such a profound example of the importance of caring for the whole person. The patient needed intense medical treatment requiring critical thinking. His wife needed optimistic yet realistic medical updates in addition to emotional support. His daughters needed to know that, amidst all the chaos, we were doing the very best we could for their dad. Later, much later, the patient’s wife, my co-worker and friend, would say to me how much she felt as though she and her daughters were literally being “physically carried” through this crisis on the sheer positive energy of all her colleagues. They had derived great comfort knowing that while their husband and dad was receiving intense medical attention, someone would come out of his room every few minutes with an update, a hand squeeze, and a quick prayer. Incidentally, that patient, who was truly on the brink of death, fully recovered and went on to complete the NYC Triathlon and make headlines in all the NYC papers.

And now a question…. Does the Ignatian ideal of “Ever to Excel” provide the “Wind Beneath Our Wings”, or, does it provide the fuel for lifelong learning that keeps the “Wind Beneath Our Wings”? I think it does both. From the day we all
entered Boston College, and for many – long before that, we have learned, lived, and loved the school’s motto of “Ever to Excel”. You have done so in the classroom, in the hospital, in the dorms, on the playing fields, at MaryAnn’s, at the RecPlex, in the library, in the dining halls, on a stage, in a club or organization; essentially, in at or on everything your lives have touched. You now have the foundation of confidence to try new things and to explore and challenge. It may feel shaky at times, but it’s there and will expand with each new endeavor. I had a nursing professor here at Boston College who urged us to live our lives by the motto: “Take a risk, make a decision and pay the price”. It was excellent advice and I’ve always tried to keep it in the forefront of my mind. When I started as a staff nurse I remember thinking that I would never be able to effectively prioritize and organize my caregiving. It became my “goal to excel at”. When I became a charge nurse (because I was organized) I thought I would never be able to lead and nurture others in the art and science of nursing. It became my next “goal to excel at”. When I became a preceptor of new nurses (because of nurturing skills) I thought I would never be able to effectively teach and communicate the totality of nursing. That became my new “goal to excel at”. When I became the first Nurse Practitioner for the pilot program in the Department of Neurosurgery (because of my total nursing experience), I thought I would never be able to develop, structure and implement a comprehensive practitioner role that would meet the needs of all the patients, families, nurses and physicians. It became yet again my “goal to excel at”. That role has now become an established NP position within the medical center.

Graduates of the Connell School of Nursing carry the mantle of leadership within the nursing profession. Earn it and don it proudly. Sometimes you will wear this mantle on a grand scale and other times in tiny unseen ways. Always remember, or should I say, never forget, that leaders are in every facet of nursing. You may be a leader as a Director of Nursing at a major medical center, as a Dean of Nursing at a major university, as a public health worker in a third world country, as a preceptor to new nurses entering the profession, as a clinical specialist, nurse practitioner or nurse anesthetist, as a rehabilitation nurse or Intensive Care Unit nurse, as a beginning staff nurse or a ready to retire nurse. You are a nurse leader alone at the bedside giving a back rub to a dying patient, as much as the president of the American Nurses Association is, giving a speech to thousands. The impact of
your education (both in and out of the classroom), interwoven with the ideals of Men and Women for Others, Caring for the Whole Person, and Ever to Excel is not fully felt or realized upon graduation. One can liken it to a slow-release medication – the impact continues to be felt long after the initial dose.

My career and my life have shown me that the seeds that were planted here at Boston College so many years ago have bloomed, taken root slowly over time and bloomed yet again and again. Rejoice in that knowledge – it will serve you well. The “Wind Beneath Your Wings” is in place – initiated by your individual talents and gifts, encouraged by your parents, families and friends, broadened by your Boston College education and nurtured by the Ignatian ideals. Let the “Wind Beneath your Wings” help you to help others and you will truly be soaring on “Eagle’s Wings”. I wish you all the best…and I thank you.