

**Valedictorian Speech By David Ditto, Mount Tamalpais College Class of 2024**  
**MTC is Community**

The first time I sat down in a Mount Tam class, I was really uncomfortable. I was closed up in a room face-to-face with the people I had spent most of my first two years at San Quentin avoiding. I'd always been a bit of a loner, and six years of prison had exacerbated my distrust, isolation, and self-doubt.

But when I began listening to you, my fellow classmates, opening up, something amazing happened.

Within the first weeks of my first class, English 101A, I found myself exchanging academic ideas with a group of people with backgrounds, beliefs, and goals more diverse than I had ever experienced before. My eyes opened to see a fuller view of the world, the people in it, and my place with them.

Yet as I learned more and more, I felt I deserved less and less.

You see, unlike many in our student body who have lived a lifetime of struggle and discrimination, my background is middle-class, suburban, white. And despite all the opportunities I had, I still ended up serving a life sentence in prison. I felt like I didn't deserve a second chance at such an enriching educational experience when so many of the people around me never got a first chance.

One day, our instructor Susan asked if anyone wanted to read to the class a poem we had been assigned about a fig tree, by Ross Gay. Despite being terrified of public speaking, I raised my hand.

Until today, I've never told anyone that I practiced that poem for hours before class that day. You see, fig trees hold a special place in my heart. That poem took me back to summertime fun with my sister and brother as young children at Grandmother's house picking and eating sweet, sticky figs right off the tree.

I wanted to share that feeling – that delicious joy of youth – with my classmates whom I had begun to see not as convicts, but colleagues. But I was still afraid they would reject me. With my heart pounding and sweat dripping, I read the poem.

My classmates applauded, Susan asked if I had experience performing, and one student shared how glad he was because he finally understood the poem. I still remember how good their reactions made me feel: like I belong. Reflecting back on that moment now, I realize that to belong was all I ever really wanted.

Being a part of something positive – that class, and every class in this college – changes lives.

That was just my first class. MTC continuously challenged me to learn and grow for seven years. From Comparative Religion to Critical Thinking, from Performance Drama to the Psychology of Trauma, you supported me every step along the journey.

Today, we graduates have reached the summit of Mount Tam. You will read about each of our journeys in today's program – our reflections on what this college, these people, this experience, this achievement mean to each of us.

When I first thought back on my experience in order to write this speech, after two hours the only thing on my paper was tear stains. So I just wrote down a few words to describe what I was feeling. Later, I realized that several of those words – encouragement, compassion, growth, support, connection – all added up to one thing: *community*.

MTC is community. It's us – the people in this room. Every one of us gives of our own self to help the others. We are all connected. We are MTC. It's the community between faculty, staff, and students that creates a culture of engagement and self-exploration in the least likely place of all: the middle of a prison.

In that magical space where you encouraged my honest introspection, I learned I was selfish, arrogant, and insecure. Beware the journey of self-discovery – you might not like what you find. But when we are supported by true community, we also discover our capacity to change.

For seven years, you – my colleagues, mentors, and friends – have shown me how to be more altruistic, humble, and confident. You taught me to embrace our differences, because we all belong. Our vulnerability and diversity strengthen our connection. You proved that no matter the color of our skin, no matter how many opportunities we squandered, when we challenge each other's minds and touch each other's hearts, we are all golden. For that, with all my heart, thank you.

I love this picture, from the college's annual report the year after I first enrolled. It shows a solitary poppy plant growing out of a crack between the pavement and the MTC classrooms in the "B" Building.



The poppy is withering, yet flowering. It's overshadowed by razor-wire, yet reaching out for the sun. This is each one of us when we are alone-striving, yet unable to reach our full potential. Now

here's a picture this year of that same crack, but with community. It's full of golden poppies. Community changes everything. Community nourishes, washes, cultivates. Together, we don't just survive. We thrive.



Today's graduates are living proof. Like everyone in prison, we struggled. But unlike most, we flourished – because we have community. Today we celebrate in the splendor of our scholastic accomplishments garbed in glorious regalia. What a joyous day!

But getting our college degrees is not the end of our transformation. This is a commencement. A beginning. So what happens then, when the pomp and circumstance fades and we shed our majestic caps and gowns? What then?

After it blooms, no matter how beautifully, every poppy flower drops its golden petals. But it's not finished. It grows into a pod full of seeds. One day, when it dries, the poppy pod pops, exploding its countless tiny seeds all around, propagating the next golden community.

We graduates will do no less. Like all Mount Tam students, we have learned to embrace community. Now, as alumni, we will plant and nurture new communities everywhere we go. Inside prison and when we get out, we will forever foster our communities because we are MIC.

And now, it is my great honor to introduce to you – and to the world – the seeds of today, the communities of tomorrow: the Mount Tamalpais College graduating class of 2024.

Thank you.