

Valedictorian Speech
By John Levin, Mount Tamalpais College Class of 2022

Mt. Tamalpais College president, Jody Lewen, staff, faculty, volunteers, alumni, fellow graduates, students, guests, Warden Broomfield, staff and officers of San Quentin:

Let me begin by saying how honored I am to be speaking at today's commencement ceremony, and how wonderful it is to, once again, have visitors back inside San Quentin. So, here we are, not even July, and it's already been a challenging year. A challenging year in a decade thus far comprised exclusively of challenging years.

But we are here today because, even in the most challenging of environments, during the most challenging of times, the people of Mt. Tamalpais College continued to demonstrate their commitment, their dedication, and, above all, their compassion.

We are here today because they refused to let these challenges deter them from fulfilling MTC's mission to provide life changing educational opportunities, tuition-free, to anyone in our justice-involved community willing to put in the work.

We are here today because everyone of you, my fellow graduates, understand and appreciate the value of a college education and were similarly committed and dedicated to making a long-term, high-yield investment in yourselves.

We are here today because you refused to let these challenges deter you from fulfilling your mission to leave here a better, more well-equipped person than when you arrived.

You understand the important role a college education plays in helping develop the knowledge-base and critical thinking skills necessary to make us more successful citizens of this community, and more successful returned-citizens of any community.

You understand that a college education increases self-confidence, marketability, employability, and that it decreases recidivism.

And, you understand that, while education is often called the great equalizer, educational opportunities, beyond these walls, are not equally available. So, you seized this opportunity.

You and I may be here at San Quentin because of our worst decision. But we are here today because of our best decision. And I commend each of you for staying the course.

Now, many of you may find this hard to believe based on my present stature, but growing up, I was always the shortest kid in my class. So, as you might imagine, I was often bullied, picked on, and called names. But I discovered early on that by doing well in school, I could feel better about myself, and get a sense of acceptance and validation from my teachers. Plus, my schoolwork didn't care how tall I was, or whether or not I was good at sports (I was not good at sports), and so my studies became my escape, my safe haven, an island of refuge amid an angry sea of big kids and bravado.

I grew to love this aspect of school for the sense of safety and purpose it provided, and for the opportunities it offered to quench my thirst for knowledge.

Fast forward, decades later, after committing my life crime at the age of 45 in 2009, and then, in 2013, finding myself here at San Quentin, feeling very afraid, and very vulnerable. Imagine my relief when I learned about the then-named Patten University Program.

I had once again found that island of refuge amid a potentially angrier sea of much bigger kids with far more bravado. So, I just wanted to express my gratitude to, now, Mt. Tamalpais College, and to everyone responsible for making Mt. Tamalpais College possible, for allowing me to, once again, feel that sense of safety and purpose in prison, and for the privilege of surrounding myself with like-minded individuals, equally knowledge-thirsty, and with a shared desire for self-betterment. You have all made my time here at San Quentin far more tolerable, dare I say enjoyable, and for that I am truly grateful.

I'll wrap up by saying that, with all the changes taking place in the world today, I am oddly comforted by the fact that some things never change. Because here I am, nearly half a century later, still the shortest kid in my class. And you know what? I am ok with that!

Thank you all for your time, and please join me in congratulating the Mt. Tamalpais College graduating class of 2022.