

Commencement Speech to the Stratton Mountain School Class of 2012

Sarah Piampiano - May, 2012

Thanks Chris for the introduction and the opportunity to come back to SMS after all of these years and be part of what is a very special day for all of you – the graduates, the parents and families, and the teachers and coaches of SMS.

When I lived in New York City I was always getting dressed up – whether for my job, to meet friends, or for a walk in the park – That is just how NY is. So when I moved from New York City to LA earlier this year I brought all of these dresses and regular clothes with me... and I have literally not worn a single article of clothing I brought with me since I arrived. Little did I know just how much my life would be consumed by swimsuits, cycling shorts and compression gear. You can only imagine my excitement at the prospect of wearing real clothes when Carson first called and proposed the idea of me speaking to the 2012 graduating class... However, after the pain felt last night from wearing heels for 3 hours, while it may have been the first time this year, it is most definitely the last time in 2012 you will see me in high heels.

As I considered what I wanted to talk about today, I thought back to my high school graduation in 1998. It was single-handedly one of the most exciting days of my life. It felt like my passage into adulthood – the moment when I was (a least somewhat) escaping the grasp of my parent's direction over me and being granted the freedom and flexibility to create my own destiny. It was liberating to feel like I was being set free to make my way in the world, yet I was comforted by the sense of protection and knowledge that should I falter, my family was never too far behind. It provided security and instilled a confidence in me that made me feel that I could take on the world.

Dreams. They are powerful, wonderful and moving things.

As a little kid, I dreamt of being an Olympic athlete. It was the ONLY thing I wanted to be.

In the winter growing up, I would watch videos of Picabo Street and Tommy Moe racing down the mountain to victory. I would put my boots and my skis on in our living room and try to mimic their body angles against my couch. I could just taste Olympic victory in my future.

In 3rd grade, I drew a picture of me winning gold medals at the 2002 Olympic Games (which, at the time, seemed SO far off), and beating out my sporting hero – Joan Benoit Samuelson (who would have been 45 in 2002, no less). Not only did I win the marathon in world record time, but I also won the 100 meter dash in a new world record. In my mind, I was that good.

As a child my parents gave me every opportunity to pursue athletics to the level I so desired. In running they hired private coaches and schlepped all over the country so that I could participate in races against the best in the U.S.

In the winters, we spent every weekend training and racing on the cold, icy slopes in Maine. In high school they let me attend Stratton Mountain School to try to bring my skiing to the next level.

Well, when I graduated high school, my dream of Olympic glory had not come to fruition, and I decided it was time to change focus. I felt I had been given every opportunity to make my dreams reality, and with my chances of making the US ski team effectively – let's be honest- non-existent, it was time to move on. I ran and skied in college, but the seriousness with which I approached athletics was a far cry from the heart and soul I had dedicated to both in prior years.

Disappointed, but not beaten, I set my sights on new challenges. Like everything I had done in my life up until that point, I gave everything I had to my school work and graduated from Colby College with a double major in Biology and Economics.

After college, I was bent and determined to conquer the world of finance. The fast pace, the cut-throat work environment, the long hours, a world where few women had historically survived, much less held high ranking positions, an industry that was behind the movement of globalization and economic stimulation – it seemed glamorous, romantic, utterly painful and a challenge I was

up for. It was real, raw, and for me provided a higher than average chance of failure. Game on!

For the ten years after I graduated from college I worked harder than I could have possibly anticipated or imagined. During my first 2 years at HSBC I worked 18 hour days, 7 days a week, 364 days a year. In my first year there I left the office on Thanksgiving Day only to eat dinner, and then returned to continue working. I was determined to be the best and to learn as much as I could. As I worked my way up the ranks opportunities increased. I took countless trips to China, Mexico and Brazil as the sole representative from HSBC. I negotiated transactions, I explained financial implications of acquisitions to the Board of Directors of major US Consumer Goods companies – I was forging my way in an industry where few survive – and I loved it. Life was good – my career was on track, I had saved enough to purchase an apartment in New York; I was finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel on all the hard work I had put in.

Yet, for all the dedication and determination that I put towards my job, many other things suffered – I treated my body terribly. Most nights I was lucky to get 1-2 hours of sleep. I was rail thin from the long hours and stress of my job. I wasn't active in any way, and when I was out of the office I rarely did anything to improve my health. My job was my priority and it came at the expense of balance in all aspects of my life – my friends, my family, my SELF.

In April of 2009 I had dinner with a college friend of mine, Todd Elmer, who was suffering from the same “work-induced” afflictions as I (though in his case, he had gained about 50 pounds instead of lost them). He told me he had signed up for an Olympic distance triathlon – that is .9 miles of swimming, 25 miles of biking and 6.2 miles of running. At first I thought he was insane, but by the end of the night, my competitive juices had started flowing and I found myself betting Todd I could beat him at the race on no training.

Race day came and there I was at the starting line wondering WHAT THE HECK I was thinking. Here I was – I had been up since 4 AM, was standing in the freezing cold and was about to swim a mile in 58 degree water, then bike 25 miles, and THEN run?!?! I thought this was crazy.

Well I finished that race, and I loved every minute of the experience. I loved being back in competition – it was so freeing to be outside, doing something so healthy and pushing my body to the limit. It had been so long since I had done anything so satisfying. In my job I was constantly pushing my mind and body to new limits, but it was how meticulous I could be, and how many days I could survive on no sleep – limits that were pushed to the detriment, not to the benefit of my health.

On my way home from the race I sat in the back seat of our rental car and devoured Triathlete magazine. I read every article and analyzed every result. And by the time we reached New York City I had come to the conclusion that with a bit of training I could be good enough to be a professional triathlete and compete. Why?....I have NO idea. And I CERTAINLY had no idea the amount of work and level of commitment it was going to take.

When I first announced to my family that THIS is what I was meant to do, you can only imagine the concern voiced. Everyone thought I had lost my mind – why would I consider giving up a job I had worked so long and hard for to do another where the chance of failure was so high? What if I got injured? To them, the risk was too great. But I didn't care – I understood their concerns, but I had begun to create a plan and a step by step process of what I needed to achieve to truly succeed and how I was going to get there. It was scary, sure, but in my heart, I knew this was my one chance to do what I had always dreamt of doing as a little kid.

That Olympic distance race forever changed my life. My progression from career woman and financier to triathlete was – well, it was relatively short in a broader sense – but it was not an overnight transition. In 2010 I set out to prove to myself that I was GOOD enough to race professionally. And after a decent amount of success, in 2011 HSBC agreed to reduce my hours to 3 days and 30 hours per week as well as eliminate travel to allow me to give triathlon a real go. In addition, one of the top coaches in the sport agreed to take me on as a developmental athlete. 2011 proved to be a key season for me – under the guidance of my new coach, and with more time to focus on recovery, sleep and

nutrition, I managed to win almost every race I entered as an amateur, and in October I finished as the top American and 5th overall amateur at the Ironman World Championships.

That was the sign I needed. At the end of 2011 I had to decide, with HSBC, whether I wanted to take the plunge and commit full time to triathlon, or if I was going to return to full time to my job in Finance. It was an incredibly scary decision for me to make. At HSBC I made a fantastic salary, had a huge amount of job security, I was working with some of the largest and most well respected consumer companies in the world, I was travelling all over the world, owned an apartment – life was good. Under my current circumstances, I was setting myself up very well for long term financial security. And leaving my job meant going from a position of stability to one of uncertainty. How many sponsors was I going to get this year? Would they pay me or would I only receive product? How was I going to make money? How was I going to survive?

I evaluated all circumstances and carefully budgeted everything out – how much money I could afford to spend on food each month? Coaching? my travel to and from races? Massages? Rent? etc.

Yet despite these risks and probably the most profound fear of change I have ever felt in my life, THIS WAS MY DREAM – and it was sitting right in front of me. All I had to do was take a leap of faith and go for it. In the end, I decided to take the plunge. I was terrified. The lifestyle change was so significant for me.

Where I once owned an apartment, lived by myself and slept in a huge bedroom, I now rent a small room in an apartment, I have 2 other roommates and sleep on the floor.

I used to go to bed at 3 or 4 in the morning. Now I am in bed at 7:30 pm, and up every morning at 4:45.

I used to work 18 hours a day. Now I train from 5:30 AM until 6 PM every day.

I used to only eat out and ate whatever I wanted, and now I never eat out and am on a strict nutritional plan (except after an Ironman when I will eat 8 pieces of pizza, a steak and a half gallon of ice cream in one sitting, as I did last weekend!!)

I left my amazing friends and family in New York and along the east coast, picked up and moved across country to live and train in Los Angeles to be with one of the best open water swim coaches in the world.

I used to spend money frivolously, and now I track every dollar spent and maintain a strict budget to stay within my means.

I used to eat probably 1,500 calories a day. Now, some days, I eat upwards of 8-10,000 calories.

In April of this year I won my first race as a professional athlete – the New Orleans 70.3 triathlon. Competing in this race were some of the best female triathletes in the world, including the 2010 Ironman World Champion. My hard work and dedication has been paying off, and I am on the road to the level and kind of success for which I had dreamed. Winning this race was a moment I will never forget, and has justified in every way, not just to myself, but to others – my family, my friends, my coaches and my sponsors, that this was the right decision. I'm working to create a brand, I'm doing filming for some of the companies I represent, speaking to a group of high school graduates, and motivating others to lead more healthy lifestyles – How could I possibly have passed this all up?

But there are a few lessons learned from this experience. The first is that money does not buy happiness. I am happier than I have ever been in my life, yet I am living an incredibly basic lifestyle.

The second is that to live your dreams and do what you were meant to be doing sometimes means making sacrifices, which, when you are happy, don't really seem like sacrifices at all. They add to the adventure and the enjoyment of the journey.

So how does this all tie back to you – to each of you in the class of 2012?

Well, today is the first day of the rest of your life. Graduating from high school is a momentous event. There are going to be so many opportunities that you will be presented with going forward, and so many chances to dream and to take risks, and to do things that scare you.

My advice to you is to take those chances; don't be afraid to dream. Take those risks. Do not be afraid to fail. Because in the end, it is those things that are going to make you the most happy, and probably bring you the most success.

And it doesn't have to be being a professional athlete. Maybe you dream to be a doctor, or a teacher, or travel the world and be a photographer. Each one of your dreams can differ – but you shouldn't be afraid to explore and to give yourself a chance to succeed at whatever it is that you dream of doing. And for some of you, pursuing a dream doesn't necessarily even have to coincide with what your career is. Maybe you have a career that facilitates you doing something that you love.

Just DON'T BE AFRAID TO CHASE YOUR DREAM. GO FOR IT. BELIEVE IN YOURSELF. You guys have just graduated from Stratton Mountain School. It has taught you – if nothing else – so much about diligence, and dedication, and determination and focus. All of these skills you can apply to anything it is that you do.

When I joined HSBC, I was working 18 hours a day. And you know what got me through? It was determination, and stubbornness and a drive to succeed – all of the things that you all have put into your ski racing, or snowboarding, or Nordic skiing. You have been blessed with a profound skill set learned through the opportunity to attend SMS, and you should use it in any way that you can.

I will close with one final thought –

A week ago I competed at the Ironman Texas, and at the awards ceremony the next day, the men's winner, Jordan Rapp, referenced Icarus in his acceptance speech.

For those who don't know, the story of Icarus is about a boy for whom wings of wax were made. He was told to not fly too close to the sun or else his wings would melt, and he would fall from the sky. Icarus flew, he flew too close to the sun, his wings melted, and he fell.

For many the story is tragic, but in Jordan's speech, he interpreted it as a story of success. Sure, Icarus fell (and failed), but only after he FLEW – he FLEW! He dreamed, he took a chance, and he flew.

DON'T be afraid to dream. DON'T be afraid to fly. And DON'T be afraid to fail.

Congratulations!