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What do you want for your birthday? my mother would ask, and I would usually give her the same response every year, “I want to be a superhero. I want to have superpowers, be famous and save the world.” She’d laugh at my wide eyes and earnest expression, much the way Santa did when I asked him for the same thing, us both knowing full well that I would have to settle for socks and colored pencils instead. But at least I was persistent. I was the kid with the bright pink PowerRangers lunchbox, the kid who dressed up as Catwoman for Halloween instead of a Disney princess. I’ll even admit to memorizing the entire Pokemon song, and to galloping around with a broom trying to recreate Quidditch. But I was also the kid with huge glasses back in first grade, the kid who spent an entire PE class trying to shoot a basketball and missing, the kid picked last on every sports team, every time. I hated being me, and so I pretended to be someone else – a Jedi, a wizard, someone capable of doing the amazing things that I couldn’t, someone who could save the world and be loved by it. It was only much later that I realized there are other ways to be a hero and to change the world with the things you do – one that doesn’t involve flying around in a bright yellow spandex suit. It’s called being a Trojan engineer.

As an engineering student at Viterbi, I’ve had the highest privilege of getting to know people who dream about and do amazing things on a daily basis. People who aren’t afraid of expressing themselves fully, who will take on every challenge with a determination of steel. I’m talking about all of you, here and now. You dominate in the classroom, whether it be on paper, online, in LabVIEW or in SolidWorks. You do ridiculously hard problem sets every week, and have
developed incredible efficiency and work ethic. While my business major friends talk about collaboration and effective resource management (sorry business major friends, we pick on you because we love you) – we engineers put these terms in practice – we’ve set up late-night study groups to review before finals, debugged MATLAB project codes just a few precious hours before they’re due, and we’ve figured out how to survive engineering on the budget of a broke college student – between free printing at CED, free tutoring at VARC, and free dinner and T-shirts from SWE, IEEE, ASBME, and Illumin, we’ve done quite well for ourselves.

But achieving remarkable feats isn’t limited to the classroom – the best engineers I know are those that have truly mastered time-turning (like in Harry Potter!) you somehow manage to be everywhere at once, and do everything. You teach students at Murchison elementary about electricity and the properties of light. You investigate the mechanics of flight in a research labs, build robots and cars and planes and eye-movement detectors in your free time. You travel to rural Honduras to build new water systems for the people living there. And I admire you for your incredible tenacity and goodwill. You are champions in ultimate frisbee and in pudding wrestling, you create stunning artwork in paint and in charcoal, and let’s face it – you ARE the Trojan Marching Band. You are also accomplished writers and communicators, and many of you have written for and been published in our very own Illumin magazine, highlighting the prevalence of engineering in everyday life. In short, you do it all.

I was talking to Dr. Bickers the other day about how (and why) we engineers take on and do much with our limited time and our 18+ unit semesters. To find the root of this strange aliment that seems to afflict so many of us engineers – this compulsive eagerness to work so hard for excellence, and for success. We also tend to be vocal about how hard our lives get sometimes (I’ll generally complain to anyone who will listen), and yet we continue to push ourselves harder, further. Dr. Bickers’ response: “You do it because you enjoy it.” And he was absolutely right. We must truly enjoy being engineers, despite all of the hard work it entails – otherwise we would not be standing here today. To test this theory, I asked several friends about their most memorable experiences at Viterbi, and perhaps
unsurprisingly, most of them entailed some combination of very hard work, mixed in with a little bit of a life on the side.

Jeannette talked about electromagnetic waves and horse-riding during a class weekend trip to Dr. Judge’s ranch in Temecula. Long nights at CED with her EE 475 teammates trying to find components to close the cell phone system link budget. Kristina, in aerospace, also recalls all-nighters fondly, especially in her senior design project – when she would sometimes bring 2 days worth of clothes, homework, and twinkies, because they knew they wouldn’t be leaving. Ashley, in ChemE, got through torturous lab reports week after week, by pretending they were not so bad – “the fun never ends,” she would say to me. Indeed it doesn’t. And who doesn’t love lab reports. Ilya, in mechanical, remembers playing the ukelele in the E-quad to relax after exams, and discussing relativity over milkshakes at Ground Zero. And for those of us who have studied abroad, through the Viterbi overseas program or through language departments, we have seen the world anew. My semester in Madrid last year opened my eyes to the diversity in thought that defines culture. I hope to someday return to its Plaza del Sol, its mercados and churros con chocolate, and to my metro stop at Pio Doce. I’ll admit, I’d much rather be there than at SAL or Kaprelian, but there are events at Viterbi that stand out in my mind. The very first luau, the Viterbi Ball, and Talent Show, and student organizations going rock-climbing, playing broomball and ice skating – events that bring us together, as more than just peers, but as friends. Perhaps my friend Sapna, another fellow BME, says it best, likening the Viterbi algorithm to life here on campus. “The Viterbi algorithm is a dynamic programming algorithm for finding the most likely sequence of hidden states – called the Viterbi path – that results in a sequence of observed events. Four years at Viterbi were my algorithm,” she says, “that unearthed my hidden dreams and talents and put me on the right path to accomplishing my goals. Viterbi graduates are some of the smartest, most compassionate, ethical and fun people on and off campus and nothing gives me more pride than to graduate as a Viterbi Trojan.” Thanks Sapna, I think you speak for us all.

And now to think, of what the future holds in store for all of us – the things you’ll
do, the places you’ll see, and as you inventing and explore the world, I feel truly honored that you’ve been in mine. Engineering degrees in hand, you will go on to become the next generation of leaders and innovators, entrepreneurs, doctors and lawyers, politicians. Or deans of engineering schools, presidents of top universities. The future for Viterbi graduates is absolutely limitless, bounded by nothing more than your imagination and ambition. And believe me, you’ll know when you’ve made it big in life – when you come back to this campus many years down the line, and run into a student making her way to into a building with your name on it. Chances are, she won’t know your full last name, because you will have joined the ranks of the RTHs, GFSs, SGMs, DRBs of the world. Success is your very own three-letter acronym on a building. Even Iron Man doesn’t have that. But more importantly, success, in all its forms, has everything to do with the path taken to achieve it, requiring sincere acknowledgment and appreciation for all those that stood by you as you made progress along your chosen paths. We would not have made it this far were it not for the wonderful parents, professors, siblings, cousins, and even great-aunts-twice removed that are here today to show us their support and unconditional love. I’d personally like to thank a few of my professors – Dr. D’Argenio, for his unwavering support of my research endeavors and for listening to my rants when he had about a million other things to do, Dr. Bickers for being the incredible person that he is, and my professors in Madrid for expanding the boundaries of my world and mind. I’d like to thank Professor Steve Bucher for all of his insight and support of Illumin magazine, and Chris Noll for dealing with my scheduling conflicts semester after semester. My parents for paying my tuition bills and for listening to how hard my life is when I’m sure that yours is much, much harder, my little sister for wearing her USC sweatshirt even in 85° weather because I had bought it for her, and all of my friends that have put up with me and the ridiculous things I say and do on a daily basis.

And finally, to all of my fellow graduates: thank you so for your motivation, your courage, and your perseverance over the course of college and in your personal and professional lives. You better the world with your ideas and your innovations, with the actions that follow your words. You are the future of technological change and progress. You step up when the world doesn’t know where to step at
all. So as you step off this stage and into the rest of your life, please don't forget about what it was that got you here – keep dreaming, keep building, and keep in mind how you might go about saving passengers stuck in a plane on the Hudson river. Because you never know what life will throw you way. But come what it may, keep smiling, keep your head high, keep doing what you do best, because believe me, the world still needs its heroes. I know I've found mine.