

JENNY DELLER '04
CONVOCATION 8/19/13

Thank you. Today is an exceptional day, and it's a genuine thrill for me to be sharing it with all of you.

Convocation was one of my favorite traditions when I was a student at IMSA nearly twenty years ago. I looked forward to celebrating the new academic year with a ceremony that ignites our sense of purpose and places us squarely at the threshold of a new period of discovery.

For those of you who are brand new to IMSA, welcome. This is a wild, exciting time. For those of you who are returning, I'm so glad you came back to build on the foundation you laid last year. It's an honor I cannot describe to have been asked to be a part of your convocation ceremony, because IMSA was an experience that defined my life in many, many ways.

I recall my three years here being packed to the gills with self-exploration, and not just my own. It seemed everyone around me was questioning, too. Living six hours away from my family, isolated in this exuberant yet challenging live-in community, I was perpetually onto something. Every idea was new. It was that special IMSA alchemy of intellectual stimulation, brand new friends, diverse peers, and the heightened sense of awareness that comes from living away from home for the first time. Do you feel that? This climate may be challenging you to deeply consider your personal values and ethics, religion or spirituality, your sense of competition and discipline, your dreams and talents and even your idea of who you are. You are told over and over again that at IMSA, you are part of a pioneering community, and that spirit of exploration, ingenuity, and living somewhat on the edge begins to seep into everything you do. It is a very unique time and a very unique place.

When Cathy first asked me to give the convocation speech this year, the first thing that came to my mind was, "Why me?" I'm not a scientist or a mathematician. I'm not a CEO or an inventor or engineer or economist. I'm an artist, specifically a writer and filmmaker.

As a general rule, I don't like to talk about myself, but since it may be instructive for some of you in the room who are more creatively inclined, I'll indulge in a brief, edited list of things I've done since I graduated: I designed my own major in college called "Making fiction: Criticism and Creation". I was a mime. I played a Russian gun moll on the television show *Law & Order*. (I'm sure *you're* now asking yourselves "What is this chick doing here?")

I was the senior copywriter at the women's retailer Anthropologie (kind of like Peggy Olson on *Mad Men*). And I made an independent feature film that started streaming on Netflix last week.

I'm going to take a brief detour to tell you a bit about the film, because it's going to be relevant to the meat of my talk today.

The film is called *FUTURE WEATHER*. It's a coming-of-age drama set in rural Southern Illinois where I grew up. The main character is named Lauduree, and after she is abandoned by her mother, she pins all her worldly hopes on a forestry experiment. She's searching for a way to save the planet from global warming through carbon sequestration. What she learns is that life (and science) is not as black-and-white as she wants it to be.

In an oblique way, *FUTURE WEATHER* asks the audience to consider the parallels between familial abandonment and planetary abandonment. What will happen to our children if we continue to ignore what I consider to be the elephant in the global room right now: climate change.

It took four years to raise the funding for the film. Thirty days to shoot it. One year of post-production. And one year to distribute it. One of the most gratifying collaborations I had throughout this process was with my former ecology teacher at IMSA, John Thompson. The main character in my film would have loved

having John as a teacher. When he took us out into the field, he taught us how to observe the world and be in it at the same time. He is an inspiring teacher and he genuinely cares about his students.

At some point while I was in the middle of finishing *FUTURE WEATHER*, John and I reconnected on Facebook, and I told him about the film. He was so excited that every few months, he would check in and ask about it: Where would it be playing? Was there an educational component to it? Could we collaborate somehow? Finishing an indie film can be such a painfully slow process – waiting for more funding to come in to finish the work; waiting to figure out what the distribution plan would be – I felt bad not having any news to share with John. But finally, after premiering at the Tribeca Film Festival, and a great year on the festival circuit, we decided the film would premiere in Chicago at the Gene Siskel Film Center accompanied by a series of panels about science education and climate change. I invited IMSA to participate. I considered a homecoming. Mr. Lawrence brought his class and we had a lively discussion after the screening. And I asked John to moderate two of our panels. Of course he was game, and brought fresh perspectives to the film that I had never considered.

We had many lovely conversations, and seeing the film through his eyes made me realize I had come full circle with this project that had taken nearly all of my adult life to make. Besides the more obvious connections (a gifted kid, science education), I could see how influential IMSA had been to my overall journey, and perhaps why Cathy invited me to speak with you today. IMSA cultivated three values that have shaped my career as an artist and filmmaker, and I would like to share them with you as a source of inspiration on this celebratory and reflective day.

When I came to IMSA in 1991 (shortly after dinosaurs became extinct), I loved drama and fiction. As a freshman, I'd just had the starring role in the school play. So people in my town asked if I was afraid to leave all of that behind for an education that focused on math and science? That didn't even have a drama program? Thankfully, their worries did not deter me.

Yes, it was true. There was no drama faculty and no formal drama program here, so we made our own. We chose the plays we wanted to do. We directed them, lit them, costumed them and staged them ourselves. We were resourceful. We were independent. And we took a lot of pride in our work. For history fair, I wanted to study the history of improv theater in Chicago. My team went all the way to nationals. With a few of my friends in the drama program, we started an improv troupe. And when we wanted to learn more about improv, we asked IMSA if we could take a workshop at Second City in Chicago.

The moral of this story is that when I graduated from IMSA, I loved drama and fiction even more than when I started. IMSA did not derail me at all; in fact, it left me better prepared to forge my path in the arts. What I took away from my IMSA experience is that I prefer to direct my own learning rather than stick to a script. I had fully embraced experiential learning!

So it's not surprising that I went on to write, direct and independently produce a \$500,000 feature film without going to film school. As an auto-didact, I may have taken a somewhat circuitous route, but at a certain point in my life, a lightbulb went off – the same lightbulb that had gone off at IMSA many times: if I wanted the opportunity to make a feature film, I couldn't wait for someone to hand it to me: I had to create the opportunity myself.

In some circles, this is called an entrepreneurial spirit. In others, it's simply being empowered. But this is the message that IMSA gives us every single day: You can be the source of transformation. Not all of you may do that as directly as I did and some of you may find that you prefer more institutional guidance; but I guarantee that if you have a vision – whether it's a new technology or a solution to a problem or a story you want to tell – If you plan to realize this vision, you will be forced to go it alone at some point in the process. To its credit, IMSA does not hand you everything you might want for your education. They

entrust you with the freedom to develop your interests. So I challenge you today to embrace the independence fostered here. It applies well beyond your formal education and will serve you well.

The second thing that has shaped my choices since my days at IMSA is community. Take a moment to look around you. The people you ate breakfast with today, the people who see you in your pajamas at 2am the night before a physics test, these people are going to do exciting things in their lives. And they're going to be excited about the things you do, too. And you're going to be able to collaborate in ways you may not even be able to imagine right now.

IMSA nurtures community: both our sense of community – that organizing principle you will begin to seek out in every aspect of your lives post-IMSA. And it connects us to a living, breathing community of people that we continue to have access to as alumni.

When I decided I was going to independently produce *FUTURE WEATHER*, I knew it would require collaborators and mentors. So I asked myself a couple of questions: who that I know, would most relate to the story of a girl who sees science as a way out of a troubled home life? And, maybe more importantly, who of all the communities I'm a part of, would be most intellectually excited by the endeavor itself?

Though it took some chutzpah, the first people I turned to were the people I knew here at IMSA, because I knew this would be the community most sympathetic to the challenge I'd set for myself, and the community that would be able to "spitball" with me – you know, to toss out ideas, dream, share connections, and scheme without judgment.

Reaching out to my IMSA community turned out to be one of the most critical moves I made in getting my project off the ground. Tim Harms, class of '92, who is also a film producer, was a great mentor. And in our many conversations, he mentioned that the Sloan Foundation gives grants for films with science and technology themes. *Future Weather* went on to get three of them...I met a kindred spirit from IMSA's charter class, we became friends, and he ended up being the first investor in the film... through my IMSA community, I found donors, connectors, advisors and peers! Yes, it turns out there are quite a few alum who went on to be filmmakers! Quite organically, all of these people became my cheerleaders and stuck with me over the seven difficult years it took to complete this project.

Now most people would call this garden variety networking, which is very useful. But to use that term in this context sounds a bit cynical to my ears, because this was not a smarmy, scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours kind of networking, but rather, to my own surprise! it was connecting with my community for the sake of collaboration and the love of our shared values: experimentation, invention, intellectual rigor, cross-disciplinary learning, and enhancing the public's understanding of the sciences. So my advice to you: drop the idea of networking at IMSA! Engage with the people around you! Nerd out! Embrace your community here as you would your family; and stay in touch!

This leads me to the last seed that IMSA planted during my education: an appreciation of science as a humanitarian tool.

While I did a great deal of scientific research for *FUTURE WEATHER*, I am not a trained scientist. In fact, I rely a great deal on intuition in my work. But while I was mustering the courage to go it on my own with this film, I put myself in Lauduree's shoes, and drew upon one of the scientific profession's most profound and beautifully human tenets: that of experimentation, and with it, the willingness to fail. As a result, I completely changed my perception of what I was doing from something next-to-impossible, to an experiment that had an uncertain probability of succeeding. How liberating for an artist!

I used my skills in math and science for more practical things, too – analyzing data for previous independent films, writing a business plan, and accounting. But most importantly, in the darkest hours of making FUTURE WEATHER (and there were many), I fortified myself with a desire that had been encouraged at IMSA and given full expression to in my character Lauduree; a desire I held deep down in the pit of my stomach: the desire to shed light on a seemingly unsolvable problem and use science as a framework to seek understanding and ethical solutions. In other words, I had something larger than myself – a passion for the environment, a desire to “advance the human condition”, a moral motivation – that pushed my work forward.

IMSA, as an educational laboratory where YOU are the guinea pigs! is founded on this notion. IMSA is not just about STEM education for the sake of STEM education. IMSA’s mission is to improve STEM education for the entire state of Illinois. And in so doing, IMSA asks you to consider the real-world context for your own inquiries.

As pressures escalate from population growth, technological demand, and climate change, and come to bear on our health and our habitat, I believe that the human component of science education is going to become critical for your generation.

Our world is becoming ever more complex by the minute, and as citizens, we can no longer afford to isolate scientific understanding to professional communities. Science generates conversations and connections; it opens doors to previously unknown worlds; it fosters community and collaboration; it requires creativity and imagination; and its ever-growing knowledge of the physical universe can also safeguard our planet. It is invaluable to cultural advancement and to posterity. Regardless of whether or not you pursue a profession in the sciences, you will be our leaders some day. And our leaders need to be scientifically literate and socially aware.

From what I’ve seen and heard over the past two decades, IMSA students continue to work hard and excel. But these are not characteristics I hold unique to this institution. It is not just your individual talents (though considerable) or your achievements (though remarkable) that make IMSA so special. It is your passion for learning in every aspect of your life. It is your capacity for independence and collaboration. It is your willingness to participate in this great experiment, despite the risk. And it is your genuine desire to improve not only your immediate community, but the global community. That’s what makes IMSA special.

On this exceptional day and throughout the year, I urge you to pursue this spirit, to nurture it in yourselves, and take heart in it when times are tough. This is the magic that will hold you together over the years and bear many gifts. I wish you many rich discoveries this year.