

THIS GHANAIAAN FOUND A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

What is the definition of a home? To some people, it is the place where the heart is. To others, it is a place of family, a place where you feel the most peace and comfort, and a place where you make your favorite memories. I found myself a new home at age 18; a place just like all the ones mentioned and even more. A place that welcomed me, challenged me, molded me, made me cry, made me laugh, made me learn, allowed me to fail many times but rise up again and again. A place that taught me the true meaning of friendship, a place that made me reach deeper within myself to confront and uncover the very core of who I am. Overall, a place that made me into the person you see standing before you today. This home I found is Eastern Illinois University.

As many times that I have thought of the day I get to walk across this stage, I also hoped for the opportunity to be able to share a piece my story of this home I found with you all. Today, my wish has come true. When I began to draft this speech, tears welled up in my eyes at the thought of this journey already coming to an end. In the next few minutes, I will try to tell you about this journey that has lasted 1,356 days of my life. I stand before you here today as an international, undergraduate student from Ghana, in West Africa. Eastern Illinois University, the place I now call ‘my home away from home.’ I remember the day I received my admission letter. My family was so happy that, my very own name was abandoned and I was now nicknamed “Eastern” at home. Growing up, I always felt the need to move out of my comfort zone and broaden my horizon. So I chose to study abroad to do just that, and I have never regretted making this decision. “Follow excellence and success will follow you;” this has been my motto throughout high school until this very day. In these past years, EIU provided me with the right environment to help me explore the path of excellence. What I am most proud of are the opportunities EIU gave me to grow into a well-rounded individual in leadership, volunteerism, research, and much

more. Through all this, I learned how to be a steward of the values of this reputable institution, and it was during this learning process that I realized I had truly started bleeding blue. I came to this institution as a complete introvert and an extremely shy individual who could not stand in front of an audience of even three people to speak. I felt like I would pass out if ever called upon to speak. But thanks to EIU, I will not be passing out today. Leadership positions I held on campus nurtured in me a great sense of responsibility and integrity with tasks I was given. I also developed a heart of service through volunteer opportunities which motivated me to regularly give back to the community I fell in love with and beyond. During this journey, there were the fun, and memorable times worth laughing about. Especially as an international student, your experience had a little more depth. As someone from the continent of Africa, there were the hilarious moments like being asked if I had a pet bear or pet lion. I am; however, glad I had the opportunity to add to the diversity and enrichment of the campus community through the sharing of my culture. Despite the good times, the journey was not always rosy and fun. The emotional roller-coasters came in to spice up the journey. There were the moments of culture shock, pressures of life, doubts, fears, disappointments, times you felt like giving up, the stressful moments that caused you to accidentally submit your assignment to President Glassman instead of your professor. And the worst of all, homesickness. It is hard enough leaving home for college and being away from family for the first time. How much more being a continent away from home. But we survived! Four years ago, I often wondered what my impression would be about my college experience on my graduation day- will I be in gratitude or will I hate this experience and never want to relive it? Today, I can boldly say the journey has been worthwhile. EIU was the right place I needed to be, and I am glad I found myself here. There is a saying; “you might not know what you have until you lose it”. You also might not know the value of a place until

you have to walk away from it. I am glad I recognized the value and role EIU played in my life long before the journey ended. Now, as I prepare to close this chapter in my life, the one question that keeps ringing in my head is; “will I ever find another place like EIU?” As we close this chapter, I will like to remind us all, students, to never forget the lessons and values we learned during our journey, as we move on to the next phase of our lives. Remember to always work on being a better version of yourself than you were yesterday. Challenge yourself to pursue new opportunities that will add to your toolbox. As people going out in the career world and beyond, versatility in your skills is a valuable asset to have if you want to survive this fast-paced, growing world.

Now it is time to show appreciation for our college journey. To EIU, we say thank you for these memorable days we will cherish forever. To the professors and colleagues that became friends and now family, that supported us throughout this journey, we say thank you. To the wonderful university staff such as the dining services that ensured we had the freshman 15 experience, we say thank you. By the way, we are still trying to shed off that weight, but we love you all the same. One more important group of people worthy of our appreciation today is our families that stood by us, supporting us in every way from the very beginning to the end of this journey. For your love, support, encouragement, guidance, and just for being present with us today, we say a big thank you from the bottom of our hearts! A special shout out to my parents and four sisters who travelled over 5,000 miles from Ghana to be a part of this celebration today. We made it through the odds and we are here today to celebrate this accomplishment. For some of you, it was a 2-year journey, for some a five year journey, and for others like me, it was a 4-year journey. We could not have done it without you all. Thank you again. So, Class of 2019!! This is it, we made it! We finished the race and in all our excitement, let us “smile for the camera!”