

Transcript of Commencement 2022 address by Nick Easter, PLI Cohort 19

Prof. Kris Gutierrez

And now I'd like to turn it over to our future and introduce one of our illustrious student speakers, Nick Easter, who represents our BSE Masters of Art students. Nick comes to BSE with the a wealth of experience. He is the principal of the McKinley Elementary School in the San Leandro Unified School District. While working toward and learning about restorative justice, and issues of race and equity, Nick became interested in school administration. He was previously an after-school program director, a classroom teacher, and a vice principal. Nick earned his MA plus administrative credential through Berkeley's Principal Leadership Program. Shout out for sure. He earned an MA in Secondary Education and Teaching from the University of Southern California and his BA in African American Black Studies in San Jose (State) University. Nick would you please join us.

Nick Easter

All right, this is happening. (singing) No such thing as a life that's better than yours. No such thing. No such thing.

My name is Nick Easter, representing the Principal Leadership Institute cohorts 19, and 20 as well. It's definitely an honor to be here with everybody in attendance. I started out by singing a song, "Love Yourz," by J. Cole, because I listened to it every day, and it serves as a reminder to who I was in relation to a prestigious institution, a larger society, and a Black man in general navigating historically white spaces.

Before I applied to PLI, I was in a program called Cornerstone here at Berkeley. And I vividly remember sitting on the steps of the dinosaur building, having lunch, looking around, wondering what it would be like to actually be enrolled at the smart people school.

And then my introverted mind had to unpack and dissect what I was feeling: a combination of desire, a little resentment, and a large dose of, well, it's about that time to show these folks what I'm about again.

By the time I enrolled, those feelings centered around striving to move beyond impostor syndrome and to be great for the kid that never had a Black educator in their life. Now, as I walked into Tolman Hall for our first orientation, my initial thought was, 'Bro, I'm the only introvert here. Abort, abort mission.'

Which brings me to what some would call the heart and soul of PLI, which is the work groups. See, PLI is the true story of four to five strangers picked to live in a house, work together, and have their lives bombarded by readings and assignments to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real.

This is the real world. "Berkeley PLI, produced by the twisted mind..." I'm just kidding.

See, PLI is hard, but it is different for each person in the group. To name a couple of scenarios, for some, that summer is a tough grappling of understanding one's privilege, race, and identity through holding up a mirror and then peering out the window, recognizing the inconvenient truth of one's place in a broken system. Or, more accurately, one's placed in a myriad of perfectly functioning systems designed to uplift the status quo.

For others, it may be dealing with the opening up of wounds from various traumas of oppression that arise from navigating the world as a person of color, forced to wear a romanticized badge of resilience when all they really want to do is be free.

(Audience clapping.)

Which brings me to one of my biggest challenges during the program. See, PLI gives you an inhumane amount of readings to see if they can break your will. I'm just kidding. I'm kind of kidding. I don't know.

And while writing and sharing and listening to my work groups, racial autobiographies was an enjoyable and deeply emotional experience. My toughest moment came from a 6 a.m. reading session before class.

It was my job to read and capture notes for an article that focused on ACES, which are Adverse Childhood Experiences. ACEs are traumatic events that occur before a child reaches the age of 18. They include all types of abuse, neglect and cause harm following students or young people throughout their adulthood. Heavy stuff.

I got halfway down the first page and had full on streams running down my face. And I remember texting my work group to apologize to them, to let them know I couldn't get through the article, that I was struggling emotionally. And the first response I got in the group chat was, "We got you, Love yours."

We don't get to pick our work groups, but that summer I received love. I received care. I received empathy. Three things that don't readily associate with universities. But that's the beauty of PLI. My work group became my family.

And speaking of family, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the wives, husbands, partners, even the children of all of our cohort members. Because we all know when joining PLI, we all join the PLI.

(Audience clapping.)

I have to give a special shout out to my wife Cara that morning as I struggled to get through that ACEs article. I called her and sobbed like a baby, full on ugly cry in the middle of campus early in the morning in front of the deer. Cara, forever grateful for you. Thank you for putting up with the demands of PLI and being pregnant, working full time,

(Audience clapping, cheering.)

Giving birth to surprise baby number four in the middle of the program. You're a real MVP. Trey, Nico, Nick, Jace, thank you for sharing, Daddy. Hope to make you proud.

In the song, J. Cole goes on to say, "For what's money without happiness or hard times without the people you love. For I don't know what's going to happen next, but ask for strength from the Lord of above."

No matter what the future brings, I walked out of PLI a better man because of the human investment from my cohort family and my professors. Dr. Rebecca Cheung, thank you for your words, your calls to action, your therapy sessions, knowing us better than we know ourselves. When my last son was born, Dr. Cheung literally he drove to my apartment and dropped off goods. Like, who does that? PLI folks do that.

Dr. Tom Green, thank you for understanding, your stories. And of course, all your Tom-isms reminding us of the importance of taking a red crayon to the status quo and flattening the hierarchy.

And Dr. Soraya Sablo Sutton, I wouldn't have even applied to PLI if it weren't for you. Thank you for challenging us, recommending us, then nurturing us back into shape and reminding me when to go from Peter Parker to Tony Stark.

Love yours. PLI family.

Remember when our professor said life would be easier after PLI and then we graduated through Minecraft because the entire world shut down? And then we had to do distance learning and hybrid learning, then reopen as public health officials?

(Audience, and Nick Easter chuckling.)

Well, let me just say this, while we wait for that easy part, remember, love yours.

My white educators, lean all the way in and know when to lean back a little bit, too. Dream with us, but stay in it when it gets messy, understanding that many of us don't have the luxury of choosing not to. People of color, take on the radical act of rest.

And if you have somebody to take care of you, let them do it. Don't let this work kill you no matter what the role.

Love yours.

Love your kinky hair having, tattoo sleeves showing, native tongue singing, sneaker with suit wearing self unapologetically Black.

(Audience clapping, cheering.)

I'm almost done, y'all.

To, all the teachers, principals, counselors, mentors, coaches, district folks take risks but calculate them as well. These are our babies we're talking about. And understand that a Master's or any degree, even from Berkeley, shouldn't make us Masters of anything but continued learning.

(Audience clapping.)

That's how we teach our kids to love theirs and have the tools to navigate this world. Whether they were born with a silver spoon or a paper plate like me. Live with abuela or Big Mama, we got to become Masters of education for all.

So to everyone, love your people, be with them, call them, tell them you love them. Love yourself, check in, give yourself permission to be you, love your passions, give them time.

Love yours. (singing) There's no such thing as a life that's better than yours. No such thing. No such thing.

Thank you to the graduating class.

And last but not least, I want to thank my Grandma. I'm the result of your prayers. And peace and much love to all of you.

(Audience clapping, cheering.)