

TRANSCRIPT: Ateneo de Davao summa cum laude shares the 'discomforts of privilege' in viral valedictory speech

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Gwyneth Marie Vasquez, Screenshot/Ateneo de Davao University Facebook page

Privilege comes with responsibilities. It's a fact that society needs to be reminded of constantly. It is also the core message of Gwyneth Marie Vasquez's recent valedictory speech that many people took to heart, lauded, and spread online in recent weeks.

Vasquez graduated summa cum laude of the Ateneo de Davao University Class of 2023 on May 6 this year.

In a chat with **PhilSTAR Life**, the anthropology major said she finished college with a total grade point average (GPA) of 3.98—only 0.02 points short of the highest grade of the Ateneo system.

The 23-year-old student-achiever shared that it was only in her third year in college that she shifted to anthropology, inspired by her experiences in her elective called "Mindanao Indigenous Peoples."

"I found myself falling in love with the way anthropologists think and analyze why people do what they do. Most of all, I liked going to the field and meeting different kinds of people," she said. "Anthropology has a way of getting you in touch with people's lived realities in a way that other disciplines may not, and I admire that very much."

Vasquez shed more light on this in her valedictory speech which was shared by Ateneo de Davao Anthropology Department on [TikTok](#) last May 18 and has so far earned 2.3 million views.

"Honestly I did not expect it to go viral on social media. So it was quite overwhelming for me to become so visible all of a sudden," Vasquez remarked. More than anything, the summa cum laude is happy that "people found it moving and relatable enough" that some of them offered to help finance the college education of Weweng, her friend from the Tagakolu tribe she talked about in her speech.

Read the full transcript of Vasquez's speech below.



Courtesy of Gwyneth Marie Vasquez

To our University President, Rev. Fr. Joel E. Tabora of the Society of Jesus, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Mr. Benjie Lizada, our Commencement speaker Sr. Maria Marissa R. Viri of the Religious of the Virgin Mary, Fr. Antonio M. Basilio, SJ, Rector of the Davao Jesuit Community, University Awardees,

Dr. Gina L. Montalan, Academic Vice President, Members of the Jesuit Community in Davao, Members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished guests, university administrators, faculty and staff, my fellow graduates from the Class of 2023, parents and loved ones, friends who are attending remotely or in-person, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

When news about the student awardees first came out last week, I received a Facebook message from one of my closest Tagakolu friends, Weweng, a graduating Grade 12 student from Demoloc Valley National High School in Malita. The Tagakolu are an indigenous people who reside in the hinterlands of Malita, Davao Occidental and I lived with them for two months when I did my anthropological fieldwork for my thesis. Anyway, Weweng congratulated me and said: *"Super maka inspire kaayu ka, Te. Unta puhon ma parehas ku nimu bahalag di ma valedictorian basta ma pareha lang ku nimo maka human."*

("You're super inspiring, Ate. I hope I will become like you soon. I don't even need to be a valedictorian, as long as I'll be able to finish college.")

Out of all the well-wishes that I received, replying to Weweng's message was the most difficult. I eventually settled with telling her, *"Nothing is impossible, Weng! Paningkamot lang og focus lang gyud sa imong gusto maabot. Naa rako diri naga suportang sa imo."*

("Nothing is impossible, Weng! Just work hard and focus on what you want to achieve. I'm just here to support you.")

It was difficult because I suspected that there was something untrue about what I said. I caught myself reflecting on the advice I reluctantly gave her and I realized, I had said something problematic.

"Pangingkamot" in academia, tends to favor people like me, as with most Ateneans, who have the privilege and the luxury to study without needing to worry about other things. Most of my friends and relatives, having heard about the news of my receiving these awards, would have probably thought that I did it again, that I made it out of sheer will, hard work, and intellect. But, in reality, I have been able to excel because my parents worked tirelessly to ensure that I had all the comforts necessary to focus on my academics. I had the luxury of being a full-time student and of living in a comfortable dormitory as I studied away from home.

Despite having to deal with making ends meet, my parents never made me feel that I had to worry about helping them pay the bills. In contrast, Weweng does not enjoy the same privileges.

She hails from a historically marginalized Tagakolu community that continues to be neglected by the state, and deprived of services that it is supposed to offer its citizens. Her parents have not had any form of mainstream education, and during the time of my fieldwork, they were wage laborers in a land their ancestors used to own and till. I fondly remember strolling through Sitio Matamis with Weweng and the other Tagakolu girls. In a "remote" community with poor infrastructure and intermittent access even to electricity, our main pastime, aside from browsing the internet, was either river-watching or visiting our neighbors. Weweng would then take her leave earlier than most of us because she needed to cook dinner for her parents and siblings. Sometimes she would also help her parents labor in the corn fields. Imagine her now attending to all these responsibilities while being a senior high school student and a volunteer catechist at the Malita Tagakolu Mission.



Courtesy of Gwyneth Marie Vasquez

Despite our different contexts, Weweng and I are, in many ways, similar. We were both born and raised with all the expectations that come with being the eldest daughter of the family; we are both active in our academics and extracurriculars; and admittedly, we both share the same ambition and eagerness to go places someday. There is comfort in discovering our similarities and yet, something bothers me. I know that, similar as we are, we live very different lives and may end up with contrasting futures.

While I certainly do not doubt her intellectual abilities, I recognize that Weweng will have to hurdle more structural barriers in order to achieve her dreams—surely, more than what we, as Ateneo graduates, would need to overcome. This could be what she was alluding to when she told me, *“bahalag ‘di ma valedictorian basta ma pareha lang ku nimo maka human.”*

In the Tagakolu community where I did fieldwork, just finishing high school was already a huge feat. After high school, many girls of Weweng’s age feel resigned to their fate; succumbing to their disadvantage, giving up on their professional ambitions, and choosing instead a domestic life as wives or mothers. Living among the Tagakolu helped me understand why such choices can make sense within their communities. But for people like Weweng who aspire to go to college, earning a degree, let alone graduating with distinction in a prestigious university is, as the Tagakolu would say, *“malug kapetan,”* which roughly means *“mahirap abutin.”*

So what is my point here? One of my most important takeaways as a student of anthropology is reflecting on one’s positionality. The social, economic, and cultural factors that influence how we view the world and how we are viewed by others constitute our positionality. In other words, the way we interact with others, the opportunities that arise, and the challenges we face, are all greatly conditioned by our backgrounds.

Someone like me who hails from a middle-class settler family in Butuan City might be able to enjoy more advantages in the mainstream world than someone of Lumad ancestry like Weweng who grew up in the peripheries with little to no access to social services.

This realization is what made me uncomfortable with advising Weweng about success as simply a matter of "*pagpaningkamot*" (*hard work*). I knew very well that what went unrecognized in my own "*pagpaningkamot*" was the structural privilege that rewarded my own hard work with success.

Weweng and many others like her do not lack "*pagpaningkamot*." I have seen that they are just as hardworking as any of us here has been or will ever be. The problem is not Weweng not yet working hard enough or Weweng not too focused enough on her goals. Rather, the problem lies in a society and its institutions that continue to exclude and oppress, that makes it even more difficult for someone of Lumad ancestry to overcome barriers and succeed like the rest of us.

What does this have to do with us, my fellow graduates? We have spent our years in Ateneo de Davao acquiring a strange vocabulary, with phrases like "social justice" and the "common good." We have been encouraged, in not-so-subtle ways by the Jesuits and their accomplices, to be in the service of others, especially of those who have less in life. We have been challenged to walk the talk. In other words, we are being asked to consider how the privilege of an Ateneo education can be a force for good in this world.

But here is a critical point of reflection as we stand on the verge of this life-defining moment: How would we know what to do with this Atenean privilege if we are not aware of how it shapes how we see the world and how others see us?



Courtesy of Gwyneth Marie Vasquez

I suggest that we begin by taking a long, honest look at ourselves and asking the uncomfortable question about how we have come to acquire our privilege and how others are deprived of it. My fellow graduates, let this privilege be a nagging source of discomfort for its mere existence is an unfortunate reminder that social injustice prevails.

Coming to terms with the advantages that we did not earn requires intense self-scrutiny, but it also entails a readiness to empathize and learn from the experiences of those who come from the fringes of mainstream society. Furthermore, it demands that we actively challenge and dismantle inhumane systems that disrespect and devalue the humanity of those who are different from us.

In the concrete, this means, first, using our privilege to amplify the voices and experiences of those who are underprivileged, a task which can no doubt be done by the brilliant researchers, writers, and online content producers of our batch; second, supporting policies and initiatives that promote equity, an aspect our social scientists can look into, and lastly; creating and recreating scientific and business innovations that are inclusive, culturally-sensitive, and grounded in lived realities, a challenge which I leave to my fellow graduates in the fields of business, science, and engineering.

We can do so much with the privilege we hold. But let's discard the idea that we simply must translate our privilege into action. To turn this privilege for the benefit of the oppressed, we have to be disturbed by the fact that it exists in society. It should become so unsettling that we will move towards promoting solutions that are bottom-up, and not top-down; it should become so discomfiting that we will place those at the margins at the center of our efforts, instead of using them as a means to achieve our own ends; it should become so upsetting that we will strive for interventions that are grounded in lived realities, and not imagined ones.

I told Weweng that I would always be there to support her in achieving her dreams. It's a big promise, I know. But perhaps I said it out of guilt — here I am reaping all these accolades from my anthropological work while Weweng's life and many of my Tagakolu friends' remain unchanged. It seems clear to me that there is much work to be done to systematically eradicate this inequality.

My fellow graduates, that begins with reflecting upon and being disturbed by the privilege we possess. Only by living with this discomfort can we genuinely and humanely work towards a world where everyone could flourish.

Mao kini ang dapat nato nga paningkamotan. (This is what we must work hard for.)

Thank you and congratulations, everyone.