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The Best of Both Worlds: GWU Alumna Rita Gouveia Reflects on her International Experience

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Office of University Communications

May 31, 2012

If you asked members of the audience what they most enjoyed about Gardner-Webb alumna Rita Gouveia's commencement address during last December's graduation, some would say it was her sincerity in congratulating her classmates on their accomplishments.

Others might remark on her humility. The magna cum laude graduate and 2011 Big South Women's Tennis Co-Scholar Athlete of the Year spent considerable time thanking the professors who had inspired and motivated her. Her mother would undoubtedly say it was the surprise of seeing her daughter step to the podium; Rita had saved that secret as a graduation present for her family.

For Gouveia, it was the thrill of delivering the speech in perfect English.

A native of The Azores, Portugal, Gouveia devoted much of her childhood to tennis, playing in amateur tournaments in South America, Tunisia, Morocco, Sweden, Belgium, and the Czech Republic, to name a few. But according to Gouveia, there is almost no such thing as a student-athlete in Portugal.

"When kids reach the age where they begin college, they are forced to choose. Will you devote your energies to your sport, or will you give up athletics and focus on academics? It cannot be both," she said. Determined to excel as a student-athlete, Gouveia decided to attend college in the U.S, and arrived at Gardner-Webb on a full scholarship having never set foot on campus and knowing only a few words of English.

If you'd told her then, she says, that she would be offering her Class's commencement address in English just a few years later, she'd have never believed you.

"When [head women's tennis coach Jim Corn] picked me up from the airport that first year, we could barely say a few words to each other. I just had to point at what I wanted. Now, I wonder if he wishes I still couldn't speak English, as much as I talk his ear off," Gouveia said.

Determined to be a doctor, Gouveia intentionally chose an academic track that would be challenging even for native speakers, let alone someone who has no background in English. Somehow, she managed to study the extra hours it took to overcome the language gap and master subjects like Anatomy and Physiology, Biochemistry, and Physics—all while excelling on the tennis courts for Gardner-Webb.

Gouveia says her coaches, professors, teammates and friends were supportive, giving her the necessary time to work through what she was trying to say. “They were patient with me, and I learned to be patient with myself,” she said. “I’ll always appreciate them for that.”

To thank them, Rita included dozens of her friends in a unique graduation tradition. It is customary for Portuguese graduates to order a special folder full of colorful ribbons. As a sign of appreciation, graduates send ribbons to each of the people who have made a difference in their lives. Those people then write personal, encouraging notes on the ribbons, and send them back for inclusion in the graduates’ folders, which they carry with them in their walk across the commencement stage. The ribbons are, therefore, a beautiful symbol of reciprocal respect and gratitude.

“I sent ribbons to my professors, to my friends and teammates, my coaches, even the cafeteria workers, who were like my family. Those ribbons went literally all around the world before coming back to me before graduation,” Gouveia said.

As she stepped off the commencement stage, Portuguese ribbons and American diploma in hand, Gouveia was greeted by her sister who laid her own graduation cloak on the ground for Rita to step on—another Portuguese tradition. “That’s an honor for the graduates in Portugal, to step on the cloak of a significant family member or friend,” Gouveia said. According to the custom, the cloak should never be washed, so that it bears forever the imprint of those who have stepped upon it.

Gouveia says she will bear forever within herself the imprint of her Gardner-Webb experience. But her commencement ceremony, decidedly American and yet enduringly Portuguese, was symbolic of the glamour—and the challenge—of the international student’s experience. As citizens of multiple worlds, and proponents of multiple cultures, international students are eventually faced with a pressing decision: in which world will I choose to make my home?

That is precisely the question with which Gouveia is wrestling as a young alumna. Consider, for example, her path(s) toward becoming a doctor.

To make herself a more competitive medical school applicant, Gouveia spent the Spring 2012 semester doing post-graduate work in the sciences at Gardner-Webb. She is also studying for the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), a daunting task even for native English speakers.

But medical school in the U.S. costs thousands of dollars, and while taking out student loans is a common practice in the U.S., Gouveia says Portuguese culture frowns on taking out loans for education. She hopes to earn scholarships, but many medical schools don’t offer scholarship opportunities until the second year, and some American medical schools don’t accept international students at all.

Going back to Portugal, where medical school is much less expensive, is an option. But whereas the American education system saves specialized training until the graduate level, Portuguese undergraduate programs are long and extremely specialized. That means returning home would essentially require starting over at the undergraduate level. Gouveia says that's a step she is reluctant to take.

"I am proud to have earned my degree from Gardner-Webb," she said. "I am proud of what I accomplished here. I want to continue building on that."

Despite the challenges, Gouveia is confident that her future will become clear in time—even if she has to be patient. She recently landed a staff job analyzing optical coronary tomography images for University Hospitals Harrington Heart and Vascular Institute in Cleveland, Ohio, a position that may strengthen her application and help her pay for medical school.

But no matter what her professional future holds—in America or Portugal—Gouveia says the true value of her Gardner-Webb experience is much more intangible.

"So many people from my island never leave home, even to travel to the [European] mainland. But I have seen the world. I mean, here I am giving you this interview in English. I gave a commencement speech in English. I even dream in English now. I never imagined I could do any of this. I wouldn't change a thing."

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