

What the Mercy Ring Means to Me Courtney D. '23

I got ready with pure excitement that morning. My mom and I triple-checked my book bag ensuring I had my pencils, folders, lunch, and everything else my teachers had written on the school supply list. Finally arriving, I leapt out of the car and ran towards the doors, so excited to see the inside of my new school when, suddenly, I broke my mother's voice: COURTNEY! COME BACK! I NEED A PICTURE FOR YOUR FIRST DAY OF KINDERGARTEN! Ahhh yes, the one thing I forgot: mom's must-have pictures for all of life's moments. I spun around and threw on my picture-perfect smile, avoiding the need for a re-do. Picture taken, I gave her a hug, waved goodbye, and ran into the start of something new.

When I think about significant moments like this one, I remember "the pause button." The controller of this button? My mother and her camera. It was like I was playing this game of freeze dance: I had to stop everything – stop the fun, stop the joy, stop *living* - and "say cheese." Hitting the pause button during the exciting parts of my life was very hard and sometimes annoying. Sorry, Mom. I was just so impatient, eager to live in the present rather than take a picture to "remember the memory" for the future. But then again, sometimes when you are young, you forget to think about what you are going to want in the future until the future actually arrives. And that is exactly how my high school experience panned out.

I came into high school with all the scared, nervous, excited, and anxious feelings that everyone gets, but what I was really excited for was getting through my freshman year. I mean who wasn't worried to be a freshman? I wanted a lot of things as a freshman: good grades, lots of friends, to do well on my sports teams, and the obvious "make good first impressions." I loved the new start at a new school with new people, new teachers, new classes, and a place where I was going to be the same me, but with new growth. I seized opportunities in sports, clubs, and did my best to learn all of the Mercy traditions. I thought that I still had three years of high school left to live; there was no need to press the pause button myself. In fact, if it were possible, I would have hit fast forward.

Then the longest pause of my life happened.

At first, I wasn't scared and was definitely not expecting to lose the time that I, so easily, just expected to come. Then, I realized that I was losing more than any of us initially expected and I so badly wanted to go back to the way things were before. I wanted the time back that I felt was stolen from me, the time that I had planned to have, and the time to make lifetime memories.

I came back to hybrid learning during the middle of my sophomore year, extremely grateful to be back in school, but also disappointed to not be with my whole class and all my friends at the same time. Ironically, I wanted to go back to my Freshman year when life was "normal." But coming out of isolation, I knew that I needed to stop wishing my life away. I needed to learn from what everyone had gone through and take moments to hit pause when I found excitement, learned something new, or felt glimmers of hope for gaining back the little things that I thought I lost.

My junior year, I came back vowing to myself that I was going to make the year count and take in every single moment, remembering how easily it could be lost. One of these moments came from field day. While I had seen videos, I was still in awe when the day came. It was the first time our class fully participated in the long-standing Mercy tradition: picking a theme, practicing songs and dances, making costumes and even carrying out the performance. I remember the moment waiting behind the gym curtain, repeating the choreography over and over in my head, getting ready to go out with my best dance moves. I turned around, looked at all my classmates – all of you – standing behind me. And I pressed pause. I breathed in the nerves, the excitement, and was overwhelmingly grateful to have the opportunity to experience this with my class. And if I do so say myself, I was pretty proud of the outcome if you know what I mean. Actually, using my pause button gave me time to stop and think about what I have been blessed with, what I wished to give to others, and what I could do to become a better me.

When I think about what the Mercy Ring means to me, I see it as all of the times that I pushed that pause button and reflected on what I had in front of me. The ring to me is like all my mom's pictures to her: a reminder of who I was to, the girl I am now, and the woman I will grow into. Mercy is helping me grow into a woman of confidence, uniting me with people I will remember forever, and providing me with a worldwide sisterhood of women: a family. While the Mercy ring may have a different meaning for everyone, it unites students, friends, classes, schools, and women around the world. It is our past, our present, and our future. After high school, this ring will be a reminder of all of my pauses, but it will also be a reminder of the pauses that are yet to come.

Our values tell us that a Mercy Girl "appreciates all that she has." So, to fully appreciate the moment we are in right now, I invite all of you to join me in pausing. If you are one of my classmates just receiving your ring, look at it and absorb this for your future self. If you are an alumna wearing your ring today, hold it and remember what your ring meant to you on your ring day. And everyone else in the audience, if you haven't been blessed with Mercy's beautiful red emblem, that's okay, because this moment is for you too. Breathe in the silence, think about what your Mercy experience has been like, and remember that everyone in this room right now is and always will be a vital member of our Mercy family. Please join me now to acknowledge and appreciate this wonderful moment.

When I think back to my mom's pictures, I used to think that they were interruptions in my life. I realize now that they were really an expansion. On my first day of school, my mom's pictures meant a thousand words, but today our rings mean thousands more. This, right here, right now, is like all of our pictures on the first day of kindergarten, excited girls running in to experience a new stage in their lives. So, relish in the same kind of excitement you found more than a decade ago. And don't forget to smile for all of the moms out in the audience!