

What does panther pride mean to you? As first year students, it was uncomfortable to sing along in the fight song on orientation day. As the newbies, you can't imagine ever feeling like black and gold is going to be pumping through your veins. But as I sit here today and reflect on my time here at UW Milwaukee, I know I was wrong.

Panther pride to me is challenging this institution. To some it may seem contradictory. But my love for UW Milwaukee came in the form of activism. I love UWM so much, that I wanted to change it. The community I built at UW Milwaukee made me feel at home. And like any family, there are going to be issues. But instead of condemning UW Milwaukee as a lost cause, I set my expectations high and drove forward. Anyone can point out the faults, but someone who truly cares about their community will lead with love and compassion to find solutions. I believe our campus has an underappreciated ability to allow trailblazers in the student body to make a difference. It doesn't always happen overnight, but that's because real change takes work.

This past year in my role as President of Student Association and as a fourth-year student during COVID-19, my panther pride was put to the test. As many of us know, the vitality of our community was threatened. Not only by a global pandemic, but by the over matured reckoning of institutional racism as well. The murder of George Floyd impacts everyone on our campus, but specifically it was a call to action to dismantle racist institutions that harmed BIPOC community members. Both pandemics needed to be addressed directly on our campus. Now I am not here to say that as we move on from UW Milwaukee, all is fine and well. There will always be work that has to be done. But I have panther pride in knowing that this is a campus who can step up to challenges. I have panther pride in knowing that this campus supports and produces students who can step up to challenges.

Class of 2021, I have panther pride because of us. We, as students, make UW Milwaukee. We, as students, push UW Milwaukee. And we are graduating into a world that is dramatically different than the world we had when we first stepped foot onto this campus. It's scary. Graduation itself is scary, but to add the unknown of our current world on top of such a monumental milestone, is nothing to take lightly. If there is any class that can succeed post-graduation, though, it's this one. We just persevered through the hardest year higher education has ever seen. We, as panthers, have just proven not only to our city, our family, and our friends, but to ourselves, that we are capable of stepping up to the plate when the going gets tough. This was not easy. And I can't promise it won't get any harder. But one thing I do know, is that our class is the most equipped to stand strong in the face of uncertainty. We are trailblazers in education. We are students who juggled health, education, and autonomy all the way through. And I am so proud.

So, as we continue through this ceremony, I ask for you to reflect on your panther pride. Now it's a little sappy, but if not today, then when?