

Colleagues, friends, and family,

I stand here before you in a spirit of gratitude, and also with apprehension!

Earlier this year, I was discussing with Nancy Barrett which of my skills I would like to work on; she is a mentor of mine and partner of AMCES. I mentioned public speaking, and she suggested I submit a proposal for a session at this CSAE conference. I thought it would be best if I worked up to this challenge and instead ease into public speaking at a *smaller* event. Apparently, life had other plans, so here I am, addressing *ALL* of you today.

I am honoured to serve as the Valedictorian for the CSAE, CAE class of 2023! It's a privilege to represent such a talented and accomplished group of professionals!

Each one of us has had our own unique journey to reach this milestone, and regardless of whether it took two years or five, achieving this designation has required dedication, perseverance, and resilience. We set out on this path with a common goal: to become Certified Association Executives, with the aim of becoming leaders in our field and champions of meaningful change and progress.

Personally, I have been aware of CSAE and the CAE program for as long as I can remember. My father, who is also a mentor, Jim Pealow, is a past National Chair, and a CSAE Honorary Award of Excellence winner. A passionate advocate for lifelong learning, benchmarking, and continuous improvement, Jim (*my dad*), was one of the principal architects and authors of the CAE program. So, obviously I felt no pressure!

Naturally, when I started working for AMCES, an Association Management and Consulting company, earning my CAE designation was always the plan. However, shortly after I started with AMCES, I suddenly found myself a single mother of 3 children, so I decided to wait, but I made a promise to myself to start the program when I turned 40. Well, here I am now, the AMCES lead for a national Indigenous not-for-profit startup. And those 3 kids? They are now teenagers! *Need I say more?*

My point is, often we find ourselves waiting for the "perfect" moment to pursue our professional or personal dreams. But the truth is, there is never a perfect time to start. Life is full of uncertainties, and waiting for the ideal conditions may mean never starting.

My fellow CAE's, it was our courage to take that first step, that brought us to this moment. I know that all of us on this stage faced challenges, overcame obstacles, and worked tirelessly, even when the path seemed daunting.

On this journey, we haven't walked alone. Our families, friends, colleagues, and mentors have provided unwavering support and deserve our heartfelt gratitude. Their encouragement, guidance, and unshakable belief in our potential have been integral to our success *and our sanity*, and for that, we say a big, "Thank you!"

And for those of you considering starting your journey to become a CAE, there's no need to wait for the perfect moment. Just start. Take that first step today, and every day, because it is the accumulation of these steps that leads to progress, to achievement, and to a meaningful life.

Congratulations once again, to each one of you, my fellow CAE graduates. Let us continue to stay connected, share our knowledge and inspire one another to live and lead in a spirit of optimism, innovation, and inclusion for all.

Let this day be proof of the amazing things we can achieve when we simply start. Thank you!