

## Commencement Speech

5/7/2011

Good morning/afternoon. I would like to thank President Shirley Raines for inviting me to speak today. Let me start by extending congratulations to all of you who have invested financially in these graduates. You've finally made it—your greatest investment—and I bet you aren't even disappointed that someone else will be receiving the applause. Graduates, job well done. The immeasurable hours you've put into papers and research, note-taking and regurgitating, worrying and procrastinating have finally paid off. Congratulations, you finally get a break from the all-nighters, the last minute cramming, and using caffeine as a primary form of sustenance. Enjoy this moment... The sense of achievement lasts forever, but the celebration of the achievement never lasts long.

For the last month, I have been working to put a message together that will somehow speak to the experiences of every student in this audience. Looking out at you right now, I suddenly feel inadequate. I see fresh, young faces eager to embark on aspiring successes. I see some features that look like mine, acquired from holding real world jobs, being a parent, and juggling life's responsibilities. I can guarantee that there is a different life story underneath every cap and gown in this room. I know this because Shelby County is a beautifully diverse community. We are artistically diverse, ethnically diverse, and economically diverse. We have some of the most affluent social scenes with unique music and inspiring art, and yet these settings are often juxtaposed with less economically advantaged communities, riddled with teenage pregnancy, crime, and despair. For these reasons, I know that my efforts to appeal to a common upbringing, a mutual set of experience that led you to this point in your life, would be utterly futile. Now that you are here though, I welcome you to be a part of the solution. Blessings require responsibility; so, take a moment to look back on the various blessings that allowed you to make it this far. Think about combating the obstacles that almost knocked you down.

In most communities, you have to carve your own path to success more often than not. I wonder how many of you before me today are first-generation college graduates. This is an accomplishment with unmatched obstacles. Your unique journey began without family members to offer advice and without cousins to walk you through completing the financial aid forms. The financial burden is always heavier on first generation students. I imagine you had to work through school—maybe even two jobs—juggling responsibilities and concerns. You overcame that though, and as a result, every member in your family will have someone to look up to. You serve as a beacon of hope to those who come after you. You make it look easy.

But it wasn't easy—and guess what—it's not going to get any easier. As college students, you are groomed to believe that life is going to suddenly become less complicated once you walk across this stage—as if it were a portal into the dimension of adulthood, equipped with salaries, pensions, and paid

benefits. Just look in the morning paper though, and you will see that this conception of post graduate reality is quickly changing. Governments are revamping their benefit plans to alleviate financial deficits, the job market is increasingly competitive, and employers tend to have different expectations for 21st century students. You are going to have to carve your own career path, one unique to your experiences and the opportunities that you create.

A college degree is not a blank check. It's not a guaranteed job. There was a point in our history where the coveted college diploma was an economic safety net, where there were defined career pathways to follow and all you had to do were hit the check points. Those times have passed, but do not let that devalue the experiences and knowledge that you have gained. The broad foundation of learning that you have acquired since elementary school will suit you well in today's economy. The more varied your experiences with the world, the better. More so than ever, college graduates are struggling to find a place as they search for more promising careers versus sticking with a company until retirement. As 21st century students, you will have to take advantage of the tools given to you and utilize them as best you can. That means not only being familiar with many areas and fields, but being well versed within them. You better get ready for an unpredictable journey. You don't know where you are going to end up, and if you don't want to find yourself floundering, you must exploit the opportunities that are offered to you— all of them. The industrialist Malcolm Forbes is quoted as saying, "Education's purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one."

You may need to volunteer your time, or work exceptionally hard at an unpaid internship. In doing so, you will discover a variety of skill areas. Challenge yourself to perfect your abilities, your tool box. You'll learn the lingo, jargon, and best practices for a range of careers. These make you marketable for the job market: experience and past performance. You will create relationships, and I encourage you to cultivate these relationships. They will be the link to your continued success. Your relationships will act as resources for tasks you don't understand, critics for things you could do better, soundboards for new ideas, and advisors for your future endeavors. Associating yourself with the right people will elevate your thinking, will challenge you to achieve, and will educate you on a plethora of topics. Knowledge is valuable, even if it seems like minutia, and as 21st century graduates, you should already know this. Having scattered interests opens you to the possibility of developing a wide network of contacts. This means a wide variety of opportunities.

I'm sure you have heard the age old saying, "It is not what you know, but who you know." There is truth in that, since connections and relationships can lead you to more opportunities, but I would like to modify this quote if I may. "It is not what you know, but the process of discovering what you don't know." Let the process of discovering what you don't know be the necessary fire that pushes you forward professionally. You will never grow stale, you will never be satisfied, and you will never be surpassed. The relationships you build in school, in church, within your community, and in professional

settings are integral because those people know what you don't. Don't be reluctant to ask for advice and to learn from other's experiences. Do not hesitate to volunteer your skills and your time. Surround yourself with the people you aspire to be. Look at what they do, how they talk and who they talk to. Mimic them.

Because I have faith that all of you out there will successfully find your inspiring fire and follow a suitable career path, I won't continue lecturing you on the strategies I used to get where I am. Instead, I'll remind you not to forget where you came from. Each of you endured a unique set of struggles. Each of you overcame distinct obstacles. Once you get to where you're going, don't forget to give back. Right now, you are the young professionals, moving into a workforce of old dogs who have been doing this much longer than you. They know more than you. They've done more than you, and they won't hesitate to let you know. Don't get discouraged though. If you strive for success— if you constantly push to discover what you don't know, someone is going to cut you a break, someone's going to give you a chance, and someone is going to see your potential and help you to cultivate it. You have come into contact with mentors like these before, maybe in school, church, or college. Like I said before, blessings require responsibility. You have the responsibility to prepare yourself now, groom yourself now, to be this person in return. You owe it to your community and to your family to expand the road to college attainment and post graduate success. Make Memphis and Shelby County a place where people and businesses want to be. Make it the place that YOU want it to be.

As young professionals, you still have the efficacy to believe in change. You have the innovation to create new ideas for old problems. So, put yourself in a position to exert your ideas and your vision. MPACT Memphis, an organization of young professionals, did a survey reporting that 58% of young professionals believe that there is not a strong sense of civic pride in Memphis. BUT, we have things to be proud of. We have you. You are our community's greatest asset.

For those of you who choose to pursue your future here locally, I thank you. Our community is on the verge of achieving great things in industry, commerce, education and social programs. So defy the obstacles that you will face as you have the hardships you've overcome. Employ all of the knowledge and experience you have gained to make new connections and create new opportunities. Don't let a single opportunity pass you by, and don't forget to give back opportunity once you've made it. The future of your chosen community can thank you in advance.