

Graduation Address

Jefferson High School, Warrior Stadium

Louisville, Georgia

10 am, Saturday, May 25, 2019

Good Morning!

It is my privilege to be with you in Warrior Stadium this morning. Each spring for 7 years, Dr. Long has allowed me to come to this great high school to share my thoughts with these amazing students about college opportunities. It is rewarding to be able to come back, to personally witness the graduation of this special class.

Congratulations to the class of 2019! You earned \$1.2 million in college scholarships. Your athletic teams won 8 region championships. You have been to the state playoffs 24 times in 9 different sports. Your band was rated excellent in all 12 of its competitions and as superior band in 11 of 12. Your Skills USA program produced 13 state champions.

14 of your class members will enter the military.
You truly deserve this special moment!

Congratulations to families and supporters of the graduates and to faculty, staff and administration. These graduates celebrate today because of the high expectations you set for them, the countless hours you spent with them and the love and support you gave so generously. You are the best!

Graduates, this graduation ceremony is also called a “commencement” because it is a beginning – the beginning of a lifetime of opportunities available to you because you had the tenacity and did the hard work necessary to earn a high school diploma. **My dream for you is that this diploma will lead to a lifetime of success.**

But it is not my dream for you which is important. It is the unique and special dream of success which you each of you holds in your heart and mind that is really important.

Graduates, define success on your own terms. You will never attain the happiness and satisfaction

which success brings if you are chasing someone else's dream.

As I sat in your chair in 1968 at my own high school graduation, I hadn't yet figured that out yet. Despite my parent's best efforts, I set my goals in terms of awards I hoped to receive because they sounded prestigious, job titles I thought would impress, and financial success. It was not until much later that I realized that all of these were simply how magazines and television painted success. These were not my personal, deeply held set of beliefs. I came to learn that success to me meant having a close-knit and loving family, achieving my dream of teaching college and helping students reach their potential, earning a reputation for treating everyone regardless of position with the same level of respect, being known as a person not afraid of hard work, leaving each place I worked a little better than I found it, savoring the satisfaction of serving my community, and continually taking on new challenges. Today, I do not have great wealth or fame --- but I have found happiness and achieved what I call success by having a marriage of almost 46 years, raising two

adult daughters who are strong and independent, having two beautiful grandchildren, experiencing the privilege of teaching at the University of Georgia for 23 years, and now having the privilege of being able to take on the challenge of serving as president of a college which enables students like you to achieve their dreams.

Frankly, my understanding of the real meaning of success didn't come easily or quickly. On my 18th birthday. I boarded an airplane from Oregon to Louisiana for army basic training. Soon, I found myself at a reception center with my head shaved, wearing the same uniform as thousands of other trainees, and having the same amount of money in my pocket --- exactly \$5 --- as every other trainee. I quickly realized that no one knew, or cared for that matter, about expectations other may have had of me or about what I might have achieved in high school. It was just me with my bald head and \$5. I grew a lot in a short time by realizing that my decisions were now my own and I would be judged by those decisions and actions --- not by what I had done in high school, how my friends and family in Oregon

expected me to act or how newspapers and magazines defined success. My choices were my own and would have very real consequences. My own happiness was dependent on knowing in my own heart that I had attained my own standards and acted consistently based on my own beliefs --- not upon whether I had met a some popularly held definition of success.

Your journey to success will not be identical. However, you will soon face similar ever-increasing responsibility for your own choices. Don't fear those choices. Embrace them knowing that they will make you stronger.

You will always be ok if you always make these choices with integrity. Integrity, of course, is simply always doing the right thing even when no one is watching. It means doing the right thing and then confronting the consequences. I, even today, use this simple test when I face a tough decision: "If my wife and daughters were looking over my shoulder as I made this decision, would they be proud of my choice?" You will find that the people you imagine to be looking over your shoulder will not expect all

of your choices to be perfect. They will expect you to reach high and they know that anyone who reaches for the stars will fail from time to time.

Although they will not expect all of your choices to be perfect, they will expect that those choices will always be made with integrity. It takes many years to earn the trust of others, but that trust can be thrown away in a mere second. Don't compromise on your personal standards of integrity.

Like integrity, achieving success for me means being able to say I have consistently given back for the opportunities life has given me. There is an eastern saying that goes something like this: "If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody." I hope you will think about that saying and also consider including serving your community in your own definition of success.

As I think about serving others, I often think about how very fragile my own success is. As all of you, I have worked hard for whatever success I have

attained. However, I have also been extremely fortunate. There are so many things which could have happened to derail me along the way – things that did derail others who worked just as hard – perhaps, a serious illness, a poor decision in an emotional moment, an accident ... This means that each of us who achieves success has a deep responsibility to those who have worked hard and who have not been so lucky. As Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. Secretary of State suggested, instead of asking “Why do I not have?”, we should ask “Why have I been given so much?”

Like integrity and service, achieving success for me means being able to adapt to change. My education gave me the opportunity to change from banking, to the practice of law, to college teaching and now to serving as a college president. One of the hardest decisions I made along that path, was leaving Oregon and moving to Georgia over 30 years ago. After practicing law for 12 years, I began teaching at a university. I found that, although I loved my role as a lawyer and my home state of Oregon, the satisfaction of teaching for me exceeded the

satisfaction of practicing law. I chose a new career as a faculty member at the University of Georgia. My wife, my two girls and I moved across the county to begin a new career. I will always be grateful to those who urged me years earlier to continue my education after earning my bachelors degree. That education gave me the capacity to adapt and follow my passion.

Please consider continuing your education throughout your lifetime so that you will have the ability to adapt to the dizzying pace of change in our modern world. Think about these well-known names: Blockbuster, JC Penney, Sears, Circuit City, Abercrombie and Fitch, Toys R Us. What do they have in common? They failed to adapt to the modern pace of change. That same danger faces each of us. By 2030, experts predict that 400-800 million jobs could disappear worldwide due to artificial intelligence and similar forces. This doesn't mean there aren't going to be many great jobs. However, it does mean that continuing your education is critical to enable you to pursue a job you love.

So, class of 2019, as you prepare this summer to begin college, to go basic training in the military, start that new job, or take whatever you have chosen as the next step in your life, please think long and hard about what is truly important to you – how you choose to define your success. Go get that done! Have confidence that everyone in this stadium will be standing in the wings watching and waiting to help as you soar.

Thank you and Congratulations!