

University of Missouri St Louis  
Commencement Address  
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by  
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I want to begin by thanking the Board of Curators of the University of Missouri system as well as Chancellor George and the administration, academic leaders, faculty and staff of the University of Missouri St Louis for this honorary doctorate of humane letters.

I'd be remiss not to say a special thanks to Carole Basile, Dean of the College of Education and Lois Pierce, Director of the School of Social Work who advanced my name for consideration.

And I want to share this honor with my wife, sons, family, board, staff, professional colleagues and countless friends whose lives and work reflect the values and principles for which you honor me and on whose shoulders I stand this morning.

Greetings to all family, friends and faculty gathered here to celebrate this most important milestone in the lives of your graduates.

Congratulations graduates! You have reached the starting line. Not the finish line, the starting line. This is called Commencement to denote you are now beginning a new phase of your life.

As your commencement speaker I am charged with offering some suitable reflections on this important day.

With a tip of the hat to my friend, Professor Terry Jones, I've polled dozens of people about their commencement speaker and what was said.

Less than 10% had any recollection. I found that statistic .....liberating. It removed the pressure I felt to be particularly profound or entertaining and let me slip into my favorite role of storyteller.

In the summer of 1965 the paths of three young men crossed at Camp Wyman.

As a teen, I was graced with opportunities for good fortune by privilege of heritage. My parent's families were descendent of Irish, Welsch and English working-classes.

None of my grandparents had more than an eighth grade education. My parents completed high school and my dad some college. Like their parents before them, my parents wanted more for us.

It was at the end of sophomore year in high school that my older brother introduced me to a job at Camp Wyman and that is where I met Charlie and Chris from whose lives I was to learn and be inspired.

At camp that first year, I was the counselor but Charlie was the leader. At age 10 he was bright, kind, confident in a street-wise way and very charismatic. He was, simply put, someone everyone, young and old wanted to hang-out with.

During the school year following that summer at camp, I volunteered to deliver Thanksgiving food baskets to families living in the old Pruitt Igoe Housing projects.

Assigned an apartment on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, I arrived to find the elevators out of order so I had to walk up seven flights in a dark stairwell littered with heaven knows what and smelling of you know what.

As I approached apartment 7a I could not help but think to myself, what kind of people live here?

Imagine my surprise when the door opened to my knock and I found myself looking at Charlie, his younger sister and his Mom. They welcomed me into an immaculate apartment that belied what I had just experienced.

Over boiled hotdogs smothered with yellow mustard, reminiscent of summer, Charlie talked excitedly of his friends and adventures at camp. I told his mother what an amazing youngster he was and she told me of her dreams and ambitions for her children.

There was the answer to my question about what kind of people live here – people just like me in values and potential but not like me in opportunities of heritage.

Charlie's love of the outdoors and of people was like mine. He was smart like me. He was already a leader. His mother's dreams for his future just like those of my parents for me.

However, while I enjoyed privilege and opportunities borne of heritage on which my parents built to change the odds for me, I could see with clarity beyond my years that Charlie's circumstance was such that he was going to have to struggle to beat the odds already stacked against him.

I didn't know it then, but in hindsight, the values that would define my North Star were set then and there.

I have no idea what happened to Charlie but I think of him often and he inspires our work to change policy, systems and programs to favor the odds for young people from disadvantaged circumstances.

I've thought of Charlie a lot recently as our community ponders and debates equity of opportunity for all students attendant to the school transfer issue.

I've thought of him a lot as our nation frets and debates access, cost and sustainability of our paradigms for higher education.

My North Star:

In our community and in our nation, no young person should have to struggle to beat the odds in order to secure an education with supports and opportunities that are shown to lead to success.

In our community and in our nation adults should step up to the obligation to create policies, programs and systems to ensure the odds favor every young person's access to education with supports and opportunity that will enable them to pursue their full potential for success.

10 year old Chris came to camp every bit as smart, charismatic and enthusiastic as Charlie.

But instead of a stalwart mom and a loving nest of a home, he grew up in foster care and residential treatment. He always had the safety of a place to stay, a meal to eat and a decent school to attend but they were never the same from year to year.

However, regardless of the home or institution he was living in, every time summer rolled around Chris cajoled the staff to return him to camp. And return he did for two weeks every summer until he aged out of our programs at 16 at which point I lost touch with him.

Many years later as an adult, Chris reached out to me for help dealing with a terrible addiction to drugs. We got him into treatment and soon after discharge he left for California in hope of beating the odds by reconnecting with a distant family member.

We are no longer in touch but I think of Chris often. His story was an impetus to our re-making Wyman.

Moved by our young people's struggles, enlightened by research, honest with ourselves of the inadequacy of our former program model to meet the developmental needs of youth today and ever relentless in pursuit of our North Star,

Wyman has transformed itself in the last decade from a respite summer camp where a few hundred youth spent two weeks each summer – in the hope it might help them beat the odds - into a national expert in adolescent development that delivers evidence-based opportunities that change the odds for teens from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This school year, in 115 cities across the nation, upwards of 50,000 young people from poor and sometimes desperate circumstances will access Wyman programs that are proven to help them learn, grow and prepare to succeed in their lives.

What's it take to lead the transformation of an organization and to enable young people to engage in the transformative development of themselves?

It's pretty simple, really. A great education such as you have received here at the University of Missouri St Louis is the surest path to success.

But, as documented by many researchers in the Academy, access to education alone is not sufficient to escape poverty.

The research of; Nobel laureate economist James Heckman of the University of Chicago, Joe Allen of the University of Virginia, Michele Gambone of Youth Development Strategies, Roger Weissberg at CASEL, Charles Smith at the Weikart Center, Angela Duckworth at the University of Pennsylvania and many others – including the distinguished Professors Marvin Berkowitz and Wolfgang Althof here at

the University of Missouri St Louis - affirms that other social, emotional and character assets are needed to navigate risk and seize opportunity.

In my work, I sum up these assets into the 'big five' of youth development. For that matter, I have found them to be the big five for life and I offer them to you as my commencement gift.

1. All of us, but especially young people, need caring and competent people in our lives. It's not enough to care if you are not competent and it's not enough to be competent if you don't care.

Organizations thrive when they are populated by caring and competent people who align themselves in relentless pursuit of a common North Star.

Children especially, but also family, friends, fellow workers, employers and neighbors will seek you out and thrive if you are at once competent and caring in your relationships with them.

2. Young people and those who work with them must hold themselves to high standards and expectations.

Those organizations and people who lead and succeed in life will be those who show up, step up and put up their best – every time, every day.

Be one of those people. Especially around young people. Children watch and are influenced by what adults do much more than by what they say.

3. Young people need opportunities to learn, explore, broaden their horizons, and push out from their comfort zones in order to excel.

And, it's the same with organizations. To fail to remain alert, adaptive and agile in pursuit of mission and goals is to ensure eventual irrelevance.

- Remain curious.
- Resolve to learn something new, every day.
- Don't get comfortable with the status quo – strive to be a knowledge seeker, a skill builder and a positive change-maker all your life.

And as you do, please make sure to stand up for policies, systems and programs in your community that ensure all our young people have such opportunities.

4. Even as they learn and receive opportunities, young people must be called and expected to give back, to serve the common good.

An informed and engaged citizenry is the fundamental value on which the nation and our first colleges and universities were founded.

And it's the primary value that will preserve our communities and our nation.

The lessons of history and of current world affairs teach that raising up ourselves without service and care for others in our community and country is a prescription for anarchy and communal failure.

Serving others while succeeding ourselves preserves all we value.

Don't wait until you are better connected, or financially secure, or settled in your life. If you haven't already, start now to engage in causes bigger than yourselves.

Strive always to ensure the companies, schools or organizations in which you will work are community stewards.

In doing so you will be heroic citizens, preserving the community, nation and world we share.

5. The fifth and final big principle is the most challenging. It is this, that young people – and indeed all of us - need the first four assets in our lives with continuity over all our years.

This truth flies in the face of our penchant for working in silos, for quick, painless, politically narrow or otherwise expedient fixes.

This truth calls us to rethink and redesign our efforts into collective approaches to policy, program intervention and investments in order to produce at population scale the impact we desire for youth.

I close by borrowing and paraphrasing a line from Winston Churchill's famous commencement address at The Harrow School in 1941..."never, never, never give up"....in the pursuit of education, opportunity and success for all our children.

Graduates, as you stand on your personal starting line this commencement day I wish for you wisdom, courage and persistence to persevere in a life-long pursuit of competence, caring, quality, learning and serving.

Thank you for allowing me these stories and reflections. Congratulations to each of you!