

Missouri Secretary of State Jason Kander

**Commencement Address
University of Missouri-St. Louis
December 14, 2013**

Congratulations to all of the graduates here today. Your hard work has paid off. And congratulations to all of the family and friends here to share in your success. If you're a parent of a graduate, raise your hand. Let's give these folks a round of applause.

You deserve to celebrate this great accomplishment as well. I wouldn't be where I am today without the support of my family and friends, so I know that most of the graduates here today are in the same boat. This is my first commencement address as Missouri's Secretary of State, and I'm honored that it is at UMSL. Thank you for the invitation.

As the youngest statewide elected official in the country, it means a lot to me to address all of you – some of the future leaders of our state. I fully expect to be working with some of you in this room in the coming years, whether you choose to pursue a career in public service, business, healthcare, education or whatever path you take. The great education you've received at UMSL will help you be a leader in any field, so use it.

I'm going to ask you to find a way, even if it's a small way, to serve the public, so I'd like to start off by telling you why I see public service the way I do, and how that helped me become Missouri's Secretary of State at 31 years old.

Of all the missions I took part in when I was in Afghanistan with the Army, there's one that always stands out to me when I think about the meaning of public service.

I worked with special operations and the Afghan army on a mission to transport a newly elected member of the Afghan parliament from the capital back to her home. She lived under constant threat of death, not because she pushed a radical agenda or made hostile statements intended to elicit violence, but simply because she was a woman.

I've often imagined what it must have been like every time she went to take an important vote. I doubt she cared what a particular special interest wanted, she probably didn't try to calculate the political ramifications or put her finger in the air and try to determine which position polled the best. With all she was risking to be there, I think she always just did what she believed was right.

We talk a lot in this country about political courage, but I have met a politician who had to have real courage – true courage - just to get up and go to work. Her service inspires me to have the courage to stand up and always do what's fair and what's right.

And that's why I'm in public service - because it's what I was taught growing up. My mom was a juvenile probation officer and my dad was a cop who later ran a security company... so we didn't get away with anything as kids.

Despite having two children of their own, my parents opened up our home and helped raise kids whose own families were struggling. My parents didn't have to take in these young men, who I came to know as brothers, but they did it because they had the courage to do the right thing. There was no conversation around the kitchen table about what my brother and I thought of the idea of helping someone else or sharing our home, it was just a decision my parents made because they knew it was the right thing to do. Maybe not the easiest thing to do, but that didn't matter, because our parents were teaching us that doing what's right is what matters most.

I remembered the lessons my parents taught me when I, like so much of the country, felt like I had to do something after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Prior to that day, I had talked for a long time about joining the military. But it had never gone beyond talk for me. It was a tradition in my family, after all – my great grandfather was in WWI, my grandfather was in WWII, my dad was a civilian instructor in the Air Force and was a cop, and my great uncle got drafted 3 times.

So while I had always thought about joining the military one way or another, I always thought it would be military service around or after a civilian career, because I wanted to go to law school and then go home to Kansas City to practice law.

But that changed on 9/11. I was in college in DC at the time, so when I saw the attacks, my roommates and I immediately went to go donate blood – which was all we knew we could do at that moment. We were waiting in line for a long time until they came out and said they couldn't take any more blood. But I still felt like I had to do something, so I decided right then, as a senior in college, that I would flip the entire equation, and that I would join the military and then hopefully have a civilian career around or after that.

So I enlisted in the National Guard and joined ROTC, and later volunteered to deploy to Afghanistan.

I'll always remember that first day when I landed in Afghanistan. I hadn't even been issued my rifle yet, but I pretty much thought I was GI Joe in the flesh with my pistol on my hip, ready for my first convoy to the camp where I was to be stationed.

But then, instead of the armored Humvees we had been told to expect when we were still in training, a few mid-size, unarmored SUVs like the ones many of you probably drove here today to get through the snow pulled up to pick us up. Suddenly, I didn't feel so tough. I was scared of getting hurt and, frankly, I started to get sick to my stomach.

Then I realized that as physically scared as I felt, I was maybe even more scared that if I didn't hold it together, I might spend my whole tour known as the guy who lost his lunch

on everybody on his first day. Luckily, we got there safely and, almost as important, I didn't throw up.

Fast-forward to a few months later. I'm standing in the same spot, rifle slung over my shoulder and plenty of dirt on my boots while waiting for the new members of my unit to load into the SUVs and take that same trip I did months before – but now I'm the convoy commander.

As I was briefing everyone on my convoy plan, I saw this kid who looked like I had felt a few months before. He was turning green. Just looked sick...We loaded up in the vehicles and I turned around and saw that he was sitting right behind me. I got worried again, but for a different reason this time. All I could think was, "Man, I hope this kid doesn't puke on me."

That kid was scared then, and I had been scared before, but we still got in those SUVs. In that moment, he might not have looked like the picture of courage, but he still got in the SUV. That's what we need in our leaders – the people who have the courage to push past that uncomfortable moment when you must make the right decision and forgo the easy one.

No matter what career you choose, my message to you is to try to be the kind of person that would get in that SUV. You will usually know the easy choice, you will usually know

the right choice, and when those two choices are different, I hope you'll have the courage to be the person that does what's right instead of what's easy.

My main job in Afghanistan was fighting corruption in the newly formed government. Basically it was my job to figure out which bad guys were pretending to be good guys. When I came home and got elected to the state legislature, I found out there was a lot of anti-corruption work to do there, as well – and that's what I've been taking on throughout my political career.

Whether as Secretary of State or state representative, as an attorney or as a military intelligence officer, I've never forgotten the lesson I learned growing up: Courage means doing what's right, not what's easy.

At some point everyone makes a choice between doing something or just being something. A lot of people want to be something. Leaders have the courage to do something.

I believe that I am where I am today because I have chosen to try to do something rather than just be something. I urge you to choose the same approach because it is, in the long-run, a far more satisfying one.

And that brings me to the challenge I have for you all today. Any decent commencement

address must issue a challenge, after all. I'm not going to ask you to go out there and save the world, like a lot of commencement speakers do, but I am going to challenge you to do something – well, actually two things.

Like I said when I started this speech, I wouldn't have gotten where I am without friends and family, and I'm sure most of the people in this room wouldn't be here if it wasn't for a parent, relative, friend or community leader. So, you all owe it to your community to give something back.

I'm asking all the graduates here today to commit a couple of hours a month to a cause, and stick with it. Mentor for big brothers/big sisters. Help out at a soup kitchen. Tutor kids who need help. Volunteer at a hospital. Participate in a highway cleanup. Pitch in at an animal shelter. Whatever it is, everyone in here can find something they care about. Figure out what that is, and commit to volunteering once a month from now on.

That is true public service. You don't have to run for office or be president of the PTA to give back to your community.

If you choose to do that, that's great, but public service doesn't require a full-time commitment. You just need to find one thing you care about, and do your part to help. I'm literally talking about two hours a month, this isn't a big obligation.

If all of you here today commit to a couple of hours once a month, you'll make your

community a better place. If everyone across the state makes that same commitment, Missouri will be a better place. And if everyone in the world commits to this, we would all be better for it. So even though I said I wouldn't, I did in fact just ask you to change the world, but just by doing your small part.

Here's what you get out of it: You get to be a part of something bigger than you and feel like you have a stake in things. You'll care more about what happens in the world around you. You'll watch the news differently. You'll feel more closely tied to your neighbors and, above all, develop a much stronger sense of home in the place where you live. You'll know what it feels like to do something instead of trying to be something and you'll want to keep feeling that way. I promise it'll be worth it.

The second part of my challenge to you is even easier. I would like every graduate here today to think of the teacher you had that meant the most to you. Everyone has one. Take a moment, close your eyes, and picture that teacher that comes to mind as having had a lot to do with the fact that you're sitting here about to graduate.

In the coming weeks, I want all of you to reach out to that teacher, tell them you graduated, and thank them for helping you get here today.

Teachers are the ultimate public servants. They come to work each and every day looking to make a difference in other people's lives. It's a hard job, and thankless a lot of

the time, but none of us would be here today without them. So thank them for that, they deserve it.

There are two teachers that came with me today that I'd like all of us to thank – Diana Sumner from Carnahan High School of the Future and Jeremy Resmann from Soldan International Studies High School. Can you all join me in thanking them for being here?

Ms. Sumner is the head of the social studies department at her school, and was named the St. Louis Public School middle/high school social studies teacher of the year last month. She has taught there since 2006, and has had a lasting impact on hundreds if not thousands of kids, including mentoring kids with newfound interest in social studies as well as at risk students. Thank you, Ms. Sumner, for being here today, and to your commitment to St. Louis students.

I'm also very pleased that the 2012-2013 St. Louis Public Schools teacher of the year has joined me here today – Mr. Resmann. A former history teacher, he switched to teaching science and has taught in the St. Louis Public School district since 2007. It's no secret that our country is falling behind when it comes to science and mathematics, and it's even harder to find teachers willing to take on the challenge of teaching those subjects.

But because of people like Mr. Resmann, the next great discovery could come from a student in St. Louis Public Schools that was inspired by his or her teacher. So thank you,

Mr. Resmann, for being here today, and to your commitment to St. Louis students.

Both of the teachers here with me today have been recognized for their exceptional work in the classroom. I hope a number of you here today are considering following in their footsteps, and I would also like to personally thank all of the graduates here today that are going into teaching. You are going to change the lives of thousands of kids in your career.

So, going back to my ask of you: in the next month, reach out to the teacher that helped you get here. Thank them.

If your thanks motivates your former teacher to stay in the classroom for just one year longer than they would have, that's 30 kids you just impacted. It's a small ask with big rewards. Not bad for a phone call.

Those are my challenges to you. Spend time in your community and thank a teacher who helped you get here today. I hope you take them both on. The people in this room make up a part of the future of our state. If you have the courage to do what's right even when it's not easy, and if you strive to do something instead of just trying to be something, there's no limit to what you can accomplish.

Thank you all again for having me here, and congratulations on your graduation. It is a great achievement.