

Commencement Address –
University of Missouri–St Louis – May 18th, 2014
Stephen J. Burrows

Thank you for that warm welcome Dean Hoffman and let me say what a great honor it to be here with you, our exceptional faculty, and of course our graduates and your families and friends.

Congratulations to each of you for reaching this important date...your commencement...your beginning of the next chapter of your life. It's a credit to your initiative, commitment and determination and you deserve our heart-felt congratulations!!

Imagine that, me Geography and Psychology Major delivering the commencement address to graduates from the Business and Engineering schools. The only business class I took as an under grad was business 101.... a required course at the University of Wisconsin.

And, for years, the closest I ever got to Engineering was being ordered around by my Engineer father-in-law who had this constant urge to build things at his summer cottage, that required design skill...his job, and manual labor.... my job.

Actually, my interest in Geography was to become a Meteorologist. But then I found out how much Physics and Calculus was necessary

and decided a double major with Psych tagged onto Geography was a better idea and my post graduate thoughts turned toward a career in teaching...more on that later.

But for you, today marks a pivot point. For some... your degree will enable you to start on your career path and find that first job; for others perhaps an opportunity to improve your position in your current career. And then for others today may be the catalyst, for a complete change in direction of your career path.

Whichever of these best describe your situation as you move forward from today in your career and your life in general...remember these words...

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED and be FLEXIBLE

Yes, teaching sounded pretty good to me when I was sitting in your place. But, like many of you, I learned that sometimes things don't always go as planned and often take an unexpected turn along the way.

But, as my wife Barb always says.... ***things happen for a reason.***

The key is when the unexpected happens, be ready, be flexible and be decisive because doing so will enable you to seize opportunities and have new experiences which you may never have imagined.

As an example, like many of you, I worked a couple of jobs to help fund my college education. One of mine was as a bartender at a popular college watering hole. Upon graduation, I was a bit unsettled...which is code for not knowing what the hell I wanted to do with my new degree.

While teaching had sounded good I could not quite decide how to carry that ball forward. Nobody was beating down my door, nor was I beating down anyone else' either in academia!!

Then the ***un-expected happened.*** The fellow who owned the bar ***very suddenly*** decided he wanted out of the business.... and asked if I would like to buy it. Great idea I said, but I have no money!! Long story short, I begged and borrowed to make the down payment on the business and bought the place. On my first day as owner in 1974, I owed \$250,000 and had \$273.00 in my checkbook. I remember my mom or dad saying something to the effect of...Four years of college and he's a tavern owner!!

Five years later, after a successful run in the bar business, it was time to move on and I sold the place. So was that ***unexpected*** opportunity worth it? You Bet.

First of all, I earned my unaccredited masters in business. I learned management, inventory, marketing, accounting, pricing, tax and on and on...and most importantly I realized I liked business.

Second, it opened the door to a job and Anheuser-Busch because the bar was one of the top Bud accounts in town and I had met lots of AB “suits” along the way.

And third and **by far** the best outcome was that it’s where I met Barb Renner, my then future wife and now my strongest supporter of nearly 36 years!!!

Remember.... expect the unexpected and be flexible

Ok, so fast-forward to late 1982. I had been hired by Anheuser-Busch as a sales guy interacting with Bud distributors in Minnesota and then Michigan. Sales.... it was a great job!...who needs teaching!

Then, a new opportunity arose and I was being transferred to a new position in Atlanta. It was a great opportunity, not only for the job, but also for the location. The winters were mild and way more bang for your buck in the housing market. Both of these appealed to Barb and me very much, Especially after spending years in Flint and Detroit Michigan during the 80’s recession when unemployment due to a crippled auto industry was 25% and most mortgages were upside down.

I recall that it was a Friday when the ***unexpected happened***. Barb and I were all set for our house hunting trip to the Atlanta area the following Monday and were very excited.

Then late on that Friday, I received a call from an associate at the brewery headquarters here in St Louis. He said that the Vice President of Marketing wanted me to come to St Louis on Monday to interview for a job. It was clear in his tone, that saying no was not an option...I needed to be there Monday morning and I was. And on the next day, Tuesday, the Atlanta house-hunting trip was rescheduled for St Louis.

Barb and I were both disappointed, Barb especially so and I'll never forget her saying, "exactly where the heck is St Louis." Trying to make the most of the situation, I assured her that St Louis, being further south from Detroit, had nice weather as well and much milder winters than Michigan.

Our first house-hunting trip to St Louis was a few weeks later. I will never forget it because it was three days after a record snowfall of 27" on January 30-31st, 1982. Not quite the mild winter of Atlanta that I had promised Barb and it took a while before we could both laugh about that.

So was the unexpected detour from Atlanta to St. Louis worth it?

I must admit, I think it took us some time before we could say YES to that question. One good thing was that because my career took a turn from sales to the corporate side of the business, we were able to settle down a bit. We had already moved three times in 6 years.

We set our roots in St. Louis, were able to find a house to call a home, Barb got a great job at Maritz, we made many great friends, become involved in the community and had the ultimate joy our lives, the birth of our daughter.

So Remember.... expect the unexpected and be flexible

Which brings me to the next and final story about the unexpected.

It was May 2008 and I was on a late night conference call from China back to St Louis to participate in our monthly internal Corporate Board meetings.

The Board, which was a group of a dozen or so division heads of the company, met monthly to review operating results, address business issues and set corporate strategy for the company.

Since taking over the job as head of Anheuser-Busch International ten years earlier in 1998, I had grown accustomed to being on “St. Louis time” conference calls in the middle of the night from all over the world.

In the weeks prior to this particular meeting the financial markets had been stirring about Anheuser-Busch being a possible take over target but most Wall Street analysts were dismissive of the idea and were more focused on the early signs of a financial crisis and something called mortgage backed securities.

And then the ***unexpected***. In the midst of the conference call, I suddenly heard a ruckus...and thru the crackly speaker phone in my hotel room in Harbin China, our chairman and president said...."I have just received a fax from the chairman of the board and principal shareholder of InBev and"...and on he went to tell our stunned board that the just received fax was an offer to buy Anheuser-Busch....not a merger, not a partnership, but a takeover. When he finished, the conference line was eerily silent, except for the occasional beep that reminded me that Chinese authorities were monitoring my call, as was often the case for long international calls.

The rest of course is history and in spite of predictions at the time, Anheuser-Busch continues to thrive today, six years post the take over by InBev.

I left AB a few months later in the fall of 2008 having not really prepared for this ***unexpected*** turn of events called ***retirement***. Without a retirement plan figured out, I must admit that there was a period of transition.... for both Barb and myself.

From being out of the country on average 26 weeks per year for so many years, to suddenly being home every day...well, lets just say that was an adjustment. But it's been a good transition.

- spending more time with my family,
- reading the Wall Street Journal cover to cover at my pace every day,

- working out more often,
- networking...really fun.
- Mentoring others
- longer weekends at our summer cottage
- an 1800km motorcycle trip from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam and a mission to Malawi Africa to build a church complex brought new experiences and adventures unimaginable just a few years prior.

And oh yeah, remember that idea about teaching at my commencement before I bought the bar?

The ***unexpected*** takeover of Anheuser-Busch and my retirement enabled me to become a professor in residence at Nanjing University in Nanjing China, and at Seinajoki University in Finland.

Like Barb always says..."sometimes things happen for a reason..."

So as each of you walk from this celebration today to begin, enhance or change your career direction, remember that along the way you will face the UNEXPECTED.

And while you never know when the unexpected will come, prepare for it

Wait.... you say, how do I prepare for something I don't know is coming?

First, learn to be calm in the way you handle problems or abrupt changes in direction.

Next, when it happens.... get all the facts; understand your options and the implications of different decisions on you and the ones you care about.

When others are involved, make sure you know their views.

And finally, be decisive, make the call and move forward with determination.

Each of you has worked very hard, and made many sacrifices to get to this day.

Now that you are here, embrace your future. ***Expect the Unexpected and Be Flexible.***

Thank you again and best wishes to each and every one of you.

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