

**Commencement Address**  
**Saturday, May 12, 2018**  
**UMSL College of Nursing, UMSL/WU Joint Engineering Program, and School of Social Work**

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Good morning University of Missouri - St. Louis and Washington University, **I want** to first thank the President, Board of Trustees, graduation committee and distinguished alumni for inviting me to deliver this year's commencement address. **I hope** that at the end of my message, I have inspired and motivated you to live your life pursuing your dream as if your life depends on it, because it does. I will share anecdotes and advice that I've shared with my kids. So parents, trust me with your kids for a few minutes. There isn't anything I would not do for my two kids and if it's good enough for my kids, I hope it's good enough for yours.

**My message** today is for both graduates and parents. Parents, I have learned as a parent of two recent college graduates that your job is more crucial during this transition to independence and adulthood than at any time in their (life) development. Our goal is to teach our kids to live without us. Graduates, your life is your parents' gift to you, what you do with it, is your gift to them. I have some good news and bad news.

**BAD NEWS:**

Your learning and search for wisdom does not end today. You will continue to learn and be amazed at how much you don't know as you grow older.

**GOOD NEWS:**

Today is the first day of your new educational experience and you have me as your first new instructor.

A Male, I am

A Man, I grew to be

A Father, I'm proud to be

An Engineer, I worked hard to be, but

Black, I must be. My ancestry and history assures me that I can be anything I want to be.

If we are all descendants of Africa and my ancestors were able to survive the horrific experiences of slavery when those taken were not the weak or the sickly or slow or intellectually inferior. They were the strong, wise and innovative, with survival instincts unseen.

We Americans have withstood the scars of the Holocaust, Jim Crow, Civil Wars, Plagues, Financial and Natural Catastrophes, but stand today as the greatest nation on earth.

Millions died during the transit stacked in the ships' hull like sardines for weeks chained together lying next to dead bodies. Arriving at the new land, chained to individuals unknown, where millions more died from disease and violence.

Fast forward to today where we are descendants of the strongest and brightest that Africa had to offer. That serves as a reminder to me that it is in my DNA to do what I'm doing. It does us no good to brag

about the increased numbers of MBAs and PhDs if we aren't educated as Carter G. Woodson wrote in his book, *The Mis-education of the Negro*.

You must to be prepared when opportunity arises. Sometimes you have to create your own opportunity. I was one of the first African Americans to graduate from the Architectural Engineering Program. The Dean of the School of Architecture once told me when I asked why we didn't have more African Americans or women in the program, he said blacks didn't have the aptitude to be architects. Upon graduating, I went to work for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a civilian engineer on the Lock and Dam 26 Project in West Alton, IL: the largest public project in the country at the time. I always knew I wanted my own business but didn't know in what area specifically. THAT'S WHY EXPERIENCE THROUGH INTERNSHIPS AND SUMMER JOBS ARE SO CRITICAL.

While giving a tour to a group of engineers one day, a couple of gentlemen remembered me from my summers as an intern and asked if I was interested in going to work for Monsanto. I was happy with my current job and didn't know what to say, so I asked my boss. He suggested I take the job because of my enthusiasm for design and passion for learning.

I accepted and went to work in Sauget, IL at the W.G. Krummrich Plant where I was a mechanical engineer responsible for the design and construction of several projects including P2-S5 [Di phosphorous penta sulfide] Conveyor System and DCB [Dichlorobenzene Crystallizers]. (Give examples).

I began working on my MBA while working during the day and would design room expansions and old rehab units on the side. While in MBA class, I met an individual who worked for the world's largest brewery, Anheuser-Busch. He told me A-B was looking for someone with my background of field and design experience for the Project Management Group.

He said there would be an ad in the newspaper that I should respond to and, he would also take my resume to his manager. I got a rejection letter in the mail one day and a call for an interview the next.

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS.

I worked for A-B for 9 ½ years, responsible for Human Resource Projects at 11 of the 13 breweries; experiencing tremendous highs and lows from having an admired and respected manager tell me that "all niggers steal"; to being responsible for designing and constructing quality control labs for the Bud Dry products.

It was my travels and night classes that allowed me to work on my business plan and hone my entrepreneurial skills. But it was also a time that I began mentoring in the public schools when in town. I developed my business plan before completing my MBA and decided to leave A-B when I could no longer afford to stay. I presented my business plan to a wealthy, local African American businessman from whom I was seeking funds to pursue my dream. When I finished presenting my plan to him in his luxurious office in downtown Clayton, he asked why I needed the money. After being stunned with silence for a moment, I stated "for office space."

He slid keys to the space across the desk to me and gave me the security code. He asked again, "why do you need this money?" I replied, stuttering, still in shock from the previous response, "to add a phone line." He said, "I'll have a new line installed tomorrow." He then asked again, "why do you need the money?" I ran out of reasons and moved into the space where I spent an entire year developing

business without the worries of rent and utilities. He clearly gave me a valuable lesson that took away any excuses from getting out here and busting my tail to move on with my dream.

Now, 40+ employees later with offices in Dallas and Seattle, we have completed assignments in Pittsburgh, Oklahoma and Florida.

**I am sure** you have all seen the reports that say your generation is the first to not exceed the success of your parents. Well, I disagree. You are smarter, more impatient, less forgiving, more creative and innovative and more willing to take risks.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** said "the imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity." You must not copy, you must be better. Strive to exceed your parents' expectations, by striving to be better. You're not a product of your environment; you're a product of your own expectations. No one rises to low expectations.

**You have** qualities your parents never had; however, you must define success for yourself. Success means different things to different people.

**For some**, it means having lots of money, cars, luxury homes, taking exotic vacations. For some, it means living comfortably modest while giving back to the world that has given you so much. I believe you can do both, if it is important to you. Here's how:

**Take all** of the qualities you possess and write down your goals. Start with an ultimate goal and list the series of milestones or smaller goals it will take to reach that ultimate goal.

**Find your** passion, the one thing you know you are better at than anyone else in the world and build your road to success around your passion, because this is something you will enjoy doing if you were never paid a dime. It will come easy to you. If you are living your passion on your path to success, you will enjoy life. In order to enjoy life, you must enjoy the process. If you do not enjoy the process, you are not living!

**This quote** by writings of Bessie Anderson Stacey sums it up for me:

"To laugh often and love much; to win the respect of intelligent persons and the affection of children; to earn the approbation of honest citizens and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to give of one's self; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation, to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived- this is to have succeeded."

As an entrepreneur, I quickly realized the importance of leadership and passion. I understand what it means to be a serious person who should be taken seriously. You must strive for respect versus "being liked." Too often we seek love and acceptance versus respect and serious consideration. You must define and set standards of excellence for yourself. Do not allow others to define you or set a definition of excellence.

Too often, individuals come to me seeking employment, yet they assume their presence in top schools or corporations entitle them to a position of leadership in my organization; only to learn that my expectations were higher than theirs.

Your future employers will be seeking a confident, self-motivated leader who is not afraid of taking risks and taking charge. In order to be irreplaceable one must be different and bring value to the organization. You must understand how your role in the organization affects the bottom line of that organization. Because "the bottom line....IS THE BOTTOM LINE."

I have had to fire very educated people who were not leaders -- who did not show empathy or respect for women, loyalty, commitment, customer service; all the things they may not teach in school, but important lessons only learned through living. But you can't live with your eyes closed or walking on eggshells.

If you live with passion, you learn and love and learn to love. You will be happy every day in pursuit of your dream. If you reach your goal, your pursuit and struggle was worth it. If you fall short of your goal, but enjoyed the process, you have lived well.

If you follow a path chasing a superficial goal of success called money, but did not enjoy the process, was your life's work worth it? If you fall short was it worth the pain and stress and unhappiness you went through? Will you have the mental or physical capacity to enjoy it? How long on this earth will you even have left to begin living a life of success?

**My personal philosophy** puts it in simple terms. Let's divide your life into two parts.

**You are about** to embark upon the beginning of the first half of your adult life; a journey that will define the future of our society. This is the time for you to take chances, take risks, explore your options and live for yourself while exploring the world. Be bold and selfish while you find your passion.

**The second half** of your life should be lived for others, making the world better. Assist the less fortunate, serve the underserved. No one gets through this world alone, with no assistance. Now depending on how long you think you're going to live, you decide when that second half starts, but I know I'm on the second half.

In closing, let me share my top ten pieces of advice that I've picked up over the years.

10. **Never** let the fear of difficulty prevent action - Kristin
9. **No credit** is better than bad credit and no deal is better than a bad deal -Me
8. **Don't accumulate** too many enemies at one time -Mom
7. **Never borrow** more than you need. Starting out, all you can't get from your parents you probably don't need. Unless you're starting the next Tesla Motors -me
6. **In your professional** work world, no one cares what you think or how you feel but your mother. Be decisive-me
5. **Thieves** look for theft -uncle
4. **Buy what you** want, once you have what you need -dad
3. **Not only learn** to read, but read between the lines -me
2. **You deserve** what you settle for -t-shirt

**And the number one piece** of advice I've picked up over my 57 years that I got from numerous sources comes from Dr. Seuss:

1. **Don't Cry** because it's over, smile because it happened.

You have a minute with 60 seconds in it, it's forced upon you, you can't refuse it. You didn't seek it, you didn't choose it. But it's up to you to use it!

**Congratulations** class of 2018. Have a great day and a greater life!