

Wow, what an honor it is to be able to speak at such a momentous occasion. Chancellor Sobolik, Dean Philips, faculty and staff, family and friends, and of course the Graduating class(s) of 2020 & 2021, it's been a completely normal and run-of-the-mill few years in which we find ourselves finally able to celebrate your in-person graduation ceremony.

In all honesty, what you all have had to overcome to complete your studies should earn you a second or third degree along with the ones you receive today. Despite the adversity you faced during this once-in-a-lifetime pandemic you all made it to this day, if I'm being honest, having never completed university myself, this is about as close as I've come to a college graduation.

When I was given the assignment of delivering the commencement address a month ago it was completely humbling and exciting and I suspect like some of you I procrastinated and complete that assignment the night before.

For my address, I decided to take a note from Steve Jobs, I want to tell you 3 stories about my journey to becoming an entrepreneur. That's it. No big deal. Just three stories.

The first is about redemption.

In 2010 I graduated high school and headed off to Howard University on a full academic scholarship to study Chemical Engineering. A month into my first organic chemistry class, I realized this Chemistry thing...It's a no for me dogg.

I soon found myself struggling with grades across all my classes. And it wasn't just my major, my mental health was at an all-time low, I was battling with my inner self, struggling to accept my sexual orientation. I had an overwhelming sense of shame, of who I was and for how it reflected in my grades.

After three semesters, the latter pretending to be enrolled in classes, I would have to make the most difficult call of my life and come clean to my parents about my failure. When I returned home to St. Louis I made a choice, I couldn't be the college dropout living with his parents. So I made a plan to reach the income level of the average college graduate by the time my high school friends could complete university.

I began working in Sprint retail stores, selling cell phones and cell phone accessories. I was very successful and quickly earned promotions, I would eventually leave to take a job making over twice the money at Verizon working in a call center. There I again became a top rep and received many honors.

As my friends graduated college I had worked my way up to making nearly \$90,000 a year, well above the starting salary of a graduate at that time. Over the next couple of years, I would work at Square and my savings and investments would reach nearly \$100,000 just 5 years after leaving school.

You better believe I felt redeemed. But redemption isn't just about gaining what was lost. It's the understanding that in the gift of failure, you are able to journey the ROAD to redemption. And the ROAD is rich with lessons and skills that allow you to ascend the levels of life.

For example, at the time I didn't realize that my, plan B experience, of slinging cell phone accessories in a Sprint store, would come back to fuel my success as an entrepreneur.

The second story is about perseverance.

In 2019 I was anxiously waiting for a callback. The call was coming from a Shark Tank producer. Over the proceeding three weeks, I had gone to a live audition, submitted video recording, and signed bibles worth the paperwork and legal documents all just to get on the show. I was in the final round of selections.

The casting team was excited about my product, the Flipstik. A little device that goes on the back of your phone, and uses NASA tech allowing you to stick and mount your phone to nearly any flat surface.

I remember exactly where I was when I finally got the call that I [pause, smile]

would NOT be moving forward in the process. I was devastated. After a few days of ben and jerries therapy, I knew I needed a plan. If I could come back from that thing in college I could turn this around.

I told myself I need to find a celebrity investor, someone really rich. Like Jay-Z or Diddy. Soon I learned that Diddy was having an event in Atlanta, A music industry conference. There was a pitch competition. So I bought a non-refundable VIP ticket and booked my flight.

I soon learned that the pitch competition was closed, but not to be shut down I said well there's this music competition...I can sing, I can rap. I'll just rap the pitch for my business to Diddy. Yep that'll work.

I didn't tell anyone because I knew, objectively, it was questionable as far as business plans go. I wrote my rap, practiced it relentlessly, and headed to Atlanta for my big break, only to learn that a video audition needed to be submitted before midnight.... It was 11:37pm

In the bathroom of my room, I stuck my Flipstik to the wall and submitted my audition at 12:01

I caught a break and learned the next day I would be allowed to audition live, I went in and mustard all of the confidence of Kanye after a Chik-fil-a breakfast on a Sunday. The Judges loved it. I was in the Top 5, I would get to perform my rap for Diddy himself. Or I would have if the director of the competition hadn't decided that I needed to be disqualified since I "wasn't a real artist" and was trying to pitch my business.

But I knew something that she didn't know. I knew that Flipstik was destined for Diddy. Later that day during the comedy show at the conference I got the idea to wave my Flipstiks in the air. The VIP pass was coming in handy as I was in the first row. The comic notice me and sarcastically asked... Homie what you tryna sale? That's all I need. I completely derailed the comedy show with the comics proposing all the inappropriate ways you could use a Flipstik, and eventually, they would invite me on stage and I would get to perform my rap.

After my performance the energy changed, now the director that disqualified me, was instead introducing me to Diddy's COO and his entire team, people were even coming up and asking for my autograph. In the weeks following, I would use the diligent follow-up practices I learned in my work experience at Square, to get Diddy to purchase thousands of dollars in custom Flipstiks and invite me L.A. for his next event.

There I would make even more waves, giving custom flipstiks to celebrities, building a relationship with the event sponsor AT&T, and even making a fan out of Snoop Dogg, but that's a story for another commencement address.

Several months after all this excitement I get a DM. It was from one of the Judges at the Atlanta Pitch competition, the one In which never participated. As it would happen he was a casting director for Shark Tank he heard about all the waves I had made at Diddy's event and he invited me to come to Kansas City, he would be there in 24 hours to host auditions.

Not long after this audition, I got a call. I was going to be on Shark Tank.

Perseverance, isn't just about, not giving up. It's about knowing that in the face of failure, fear, doubt, or adversity that the only determination of your outcome is what you believe to be true about yourself. If you know it's for you, the whole universe will conspire in order for you to achieve it.

My third story is about destiny

In 2020 I was setting up for a party, a watch party for my Shark Tank debut. I had gathered family and friends, spent weeks building up inventory and systems so we could handle the onslaught of orders. I was beyond excited. It was finally my moment.

It was Friday, the week of the presidential election and early in the day I got an email. My airing was going to be pushed by 2 hours, pre-empted by special election coverage. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little worried, but I knew in my heart this was my destiny.

When the episode finally started it was prefaced, with the fact that they may interrupt the program if there was urgent news about the election. We watched, and anticipation built as the show went on. It was the last pitch we knew I must be next, I burst on the screen. The room cheered as we watch me on national television reprising my rapping skills and pitching the Sharks. About 90 seconds in.... "We interrupt your regularly scheduled programming to bring you this special election report." I watched in horror, my stomach in knots, as they aired live coverage of the then, Vice President, telling us what we had been hearing all week, we still didn't know who was going to be president.

This felt unfair, it felt cruel, I was numb with disappointment. It felt like I had this huge opportunity and it was being taken from me. But if I could come back from rejection on my first audition I could turn this around.

Despite the interruption the sales started to pour in, I felt a little better, but because I knew I hadn't received the full benefit of national exposure I was searching for the next opportunity.

That opportunity would come in an email, to my Father, about a new program, UMSL Accelerate. He told me I could win a \$50,000 non-dilutive grant. I applied and I won.

At the beginning of the 6-week program, I wasn't sure it was for me. It was 6 hours a week, and it felt a lot like school. And as we all know, I don't have the best track record in that department. It's 3:40 in the morning as I'm writing this paragraph.

But for \$50,000.... I'd give it a shot. I would go on to learn quite a lot, and even more valuably I would make the connections that would allow me to take my business to the next level. Thanks to Dan Lauer and the program directors I would be able to prototype version 2 of my product and order the tooling for mass production.

Thank's to my Intern Madisyn Dressel, who is amongst the graduates today, we would revamp our graphic designs, and brand identity and launch on Amazon.

But most impactful, UMSL Accelerate would introduce me to a firm that would help me set meetings with the largest retailers in the country. And I'm proud to announce today that in 2022 Flipstik will be available in the two largest retail chains in the country. P.O.s confirmed. All from an unfortunately timed TV announcement.

Destiny is a path you make for yourself, but it's rarely the path you planned. When it seems your dreams are in peril, know that it's just an opportunity to see the fork in the path leading you to your desired destination.

Redemption, Perseverance, Destiny. Just a few of the experiences you'll have as you traverse the levels in the game of life.

As you take the stage today, understand that you will face these and other challenges in the years to come. But they are not to be feared. Know that when the wall of fear stares you in the eye, and you feel the anxiety begin to rise, the only difference between the life of your dreams and the life of regret is choosing to climb over that wall, or under it, or around it, break through it hell. Because on the other side of that wall of fear is your road to redemption, your proof of perseverance, and your path to Destiny.

That's my time,

Thank You & Congratulations Graduates!