

UMSL Commencement Address December 2021: A Love Letter

Good afternoon. Thank you for the kind introduction Dean Phillips. It is truly an honor to be here.

It's fitting that this ceremony is taking place in the Mark Twain building, because right here is where had my introduction to UMSL. It was around 1994. I was a junior in high school and we were here for some leadership program. I checked out the campus but, honestly, I thought I was too good for UMSL. I had high ambitions. I was going to be somebody. Where did I end up? Mizzou. But after I got married at the ripe old age of 20, I ended up right back here to finish my degree in business. That was back in the day when UMSL was trying to rebrand itself as UM-St. Louis. We *still* called it UMSL, despite the marketing department's best efforts to get us to change. I guess that's our first lesson today. "Be who you is," as a friend of mine would say. This is the business school, right? Not the English school? So hopefully I won't get in trouble for that.

By the time I graduated college, my life's focus changed. I had a baby, and shortly thereafter another. Then a couple of years later received the devastating news (devastating to me at that time anyway) that both my sons had autism. I went from dreams of being a career-oriented, one-day entrepreneur or CEO, to a stay at home mom of two special needs kids. When I was ready to enter the workforce I applied for an office manager position at the YWCA, foolishly thinking that nonprofit work would be an easy entrée into the workforce. I had always had side hustles, but no professional full-time experience. When the skeptical hiring manager asked me why I was qualified, I said "I have a business degree from UMSL." I got the job. Fast forward a few years, I transitioned to a similar role at DOORWAYS. A regional nonprofit organization that provides housing, healthcare and supportive services to people living with HIV. At DOORWAYS, I quickly rose through the ranks. And when our founding president took ill, I naively thought myself qualified, applied, and once again got the job. I went from housewife to CEO in seven years. I knew I had gaps in knowledge, so back to school I went.

I applied to the major MBA programs in town. Honestly, and foolishly again, I wasn't seriously considering UMSL. Then someone from the development department paid a visit to my office and said, "We hear you're applying to MBA programs. We hope you'll consider UMSL." And, I thought, why have I discounted UMSL? I was admitted into the other programs and decision time came. One local very prestigious university, which I won't name, pressured me to make a decision. I didn't like their approach, so when they called I said "I'm going to UMSL!" They were flabbergasted that I would choose UMSL over them. I continued, "UMSL got me this far. I'm going back." And I never looked back, either. Because here, in what I call the great equalizer, I learned modern approaches to business, technology and other skills that I employed in my role as CEO of DOORWAYS. Most importantly, I utilized skills we learned to deliver effective, compelling presentations to build consensus, and lead our organization through a metamorphosis.

You know the quote outside the library? *Nothing happens unless first a dream.* We've all walked by it so many times, right? It's so simple, yet so

profound. I had a dream one night when I was in grad school. I dreamt we were going to build a new building for homeless people living with HIV, who were presently in our understaffed and under-resourced emergency housing program. It happened just before I woke up the morning of my executive committee meeting. I decided to be bold and tell them my plans. Because I knew that if I spoke it, somehow that would make it real, and someone would hold me to account. Then we would have to do it. I told them, "We're going to build a building, and I know how we're going to pay for it." Kind of blowing me off, they said "That sounds great. Pull some information together and come back with something." Little did they know that semester I was taking a project management course, and would make this idea my class project. That was the genesis of what eventually developed into a three-acre, three building, \$35MM campus which opens next summer. A place of refuge for people living with HIV, where they will get lifesaving housing, nutrition, behavioral health care, support groups, education, life skills training and so much more.

Back to our lesson about being who you are. At UMSL, like you, I could be exactly who I was meant to be and thrive. A low-income, mixed kid from a single parent household, who didn't have a family with the know-how to guide me in higher education. And later a working mom with two special needs kids, who needed flexibility and an understanding environment. Here I found an academic home to nurture and support me. And because of that, 50 families affected by HIV will move into their very own home next year.

That was my dream. Each of you have your own dreams and aspirations. I encourage you to take what you've learned here, dream big, and then go do it! Then remember this place. What it means to each of us. Reach back, ensure its legacy, and the next generation's ability to dream big, too.

And that is my love letter to UMSL. Thank you.