

Good evening graduates, families, friends, administrators, faculty. It is a pleasure to join every single one of you today as we celebrate the commencement of the class of 2020 and 2021. You know as the proud state senator for the people in St Louis, I also represent this region as well. So, I recognize and appreciate the contributions these students have made right here in our city as residents even if it is only for a few short years. You know walking across the stage today will be a powerful testament to the hard work, the dedication, and everything you put into your studies as well as the pinnacle of your career.

You know, the value of your education cannot be overstated in today's society. I repeat. The value of your education cannot be overstated in today's society. As a witness of your walk across the stage today, those of us in the audience applaud you for making a tremendous investment in your future and I promise I'm not just talking about the student loans. You know, as tritons in the real-world, your experiences attending UMSL, coupled with your new degree will provide the foundation for everything that you need to provide your future with everything that it has to offer. And I am here to remind you today that in fact your future has so much to offer. You'll go on to be leaders in every industry, not just for St. Louis, not just for Missouri, not just for our country, but the world.

I'm certain that every commencement speaker in history has used the line, "The possibilities of your future are limitless." Right? But it couldn't be more true. As you walk off the stage this evening, the opportunities for each of you are limitless, but it is up to every single one of you to tap into that potential and take those imperative steps.

So if there is anything I would have wanted my younger self to know, it would be to do scary things. Like taking a job you don't think you are qualified for or accepting a job that might not be ideal because the people you are working with are in positions that you want to be in or could help you to connect with those people. Have the courage to network intentionally and build relationships with people who can help you elevate and take your career to the next level.

The steps you take across the stage today and from this day forward have to be courageous. I repeat. The steps you take across the stage today, they have to be courageous. Full of humility and perhaps most importantly, always forward. You know, the encouraging thing about the steps we take in life is that there's no rule on how they should look. Some of those steps will be baby steps, some will be long strides, some will be at a quick pace, and others will be slower. Some will be confident and some will be hesitant. Regardless of what those steps look like, remember that as long as my feet are facing forward and moving me forward, I'm going to be okay.

Now, I can't lie and tell you that things will be a breeze or that challenges won't present roadblocks along the way. And I'm certain many, if not most of you, have already faced challenges that have refined you and molded you into the people you are today. But if anyone can encourage you from a different point in the road, further down the line, I can.

My mother was just 19 years old when she had me. A single mom who worked two jobs. One at McDonalds and the other at the Walgreens in North Oaks Plaza, right down the street from

UMSL. She worked hard to ensure that our family had everything that it needed. My mother remains my hero today. It isn't just her hard working nature or her determination that inspired me, it was her relentless commitment to move forward - no matter what. We don't have the ability to choose who we were born to, and what neighborhood, and around what family. But we do have the ability to decide whether or not we give it our best and how we respond to the things that happen to us. I repeat. We do have the ability to decide whether or not we give it our best and how we respond to the things that happen to us.

As a teenager, I had an encounter with law enforcement that very well could have turned out to be yet another news story between a black male and the police. Now, I thank God that it wasn't. But what did happen is that it instilled in me a determination to influence criminal justice reform in our state, particularly for other black men. One thing it often reminds me of is my peers that I serve with in the Missouri Senate, as well as business leaders, colleagues, constituents, but most importantly the youth. I'm a black man regardless of if I'm in a suit, on a stage, giving a commencement ceremony address or not. The black experience is not uniform or identical but there are so many elements of our stories as black men that we share in common. I knew my story as a teen getting stopped by the police would be powerful because many of my colleagues in the legislature may not be able to empathize with a young black man getting pulled over by the police, unless they knew someone personally. And that person was me. Our history does not necessarily define us, but it can lend itself to a greater sense of purpose. That is exactly what I pray for each and every one of you here today.

Fast forward 15 years from my encounter as a teen, I became not only the first black male state senator in the Missouri Legislature in 20 years, but also passed a historic and statewide criminal justice reform bill. Had I not had the experience as a teen, had I not been able to share that with both my republican and democratic colleagues, I may not have been able to usher that legislature through with the great sense of urgency and understanding for why this bill was so important to pass in the state of Missouri. It was important not only to pass but to pass with bipartisan support. I knew the language used in the law would remain in place for years to come because it was mutually decided upon and voted on from legislators on both sides of the aisle. The day the bill was signed into law by the governor was one of the most significant days of my life and my career. It was a true testament to what happens when you allow the experience of a particular system, that may not have been ideal, to create something that improves that system for the betterment of all.

Regardless of whether you have a history speckled with challenges and obstacles or not, changing the narrative of what is expected of you is never easy. The limitations and challenges we face in life are rarely our fault, but they are our responsibility to surpass. That is why I implore each of you, from this day on, what we experience in the past does not have to eclipse the possibilities of our future. I repeat. What we experience in the past does not have to eclipse the possibilities of our future. In fact, this should shed light on the ways we can make a difference in the world. Passing historic legislation was a way to come to terms with the challenges that we all see every single day. Challenges that may have compelled me to use what I may have considered designed to cripple me, but instead allowed me to make changes

to help all Missourians across the state. Including, most recently, Mr. Kevin Strickland who was exonerated in November in part from a motion that came from a provision included in my bill that freed a man who had been in prison for 45 years for a crime he did not commit.

So, it is my hope that sharing my story with you today will inspire you to realize that the challenges and the poor experiences that you may have faced prior to walking across the stage today do not define you. Whether it may be your family history, your own mistakes in life, or situations you find yourself in today that may not be ideal. You. I'm talking to every single one of you. You will achieve more for yourself and your family and the world around you. And all that it takes is a little bit of courage, a little bit of humility, and steps forward.

On behalf of the Missouri Legislature, the University of Missouri–St. Louis, all of your loved ones that are here today - congratulations class of 2021. May God bless you and all that you do in the many years to come.

Thank you so much.