

Dr. Mansur Nurdel
University of Missouri – St. Louis Commencement Remarks

Esteemed faculty, proud families, distinguished guests, and—most importantly—the brilliant graduating class of 2025,

It is truly an honor to stand before you today.

Twenty-eight years ago, I sat in the very seat you occupy now—excited, anxious, and without a single job offer. I share this not to discourage you, but to remind you that challenges are not roadblocks; they are stepping stones.

I was born and raised in a small village in Iran, where we had neither electricity nor running water. At the age of fourteen, I watched my home crumble in the wake of political unrest in 1978. A decade later, in 1988, I fled Iran, trekking through snow-covered mountains between Iran and Turkey for thirteen days in the dead of winter. I arrived in the United States as a refugee—unable to speak English and faced with a daunting new world. Yet with perseverance and resilience, I built one of the most successful eye care centers in Denver, now with ten locations across Colorado. My journey is proof that no matter where you begin, resilience and determination can take you further than you ever imagined.

Today is a celebration of vision—both literal and symbolic. As graduates of optometry, you have spent years mastering the science of sight: studying the intricate mechanics of the eye, honing your diagnostic skills, and preparing to improve the lives of those who entrust you with their vision. But beyond identifying ocular conditions or prescribing lenses, today marks the beginning of a higher calling—one rooted in empathy, adaptability, and the courage to serve a diverse and ever-changing world.

Your path to this moment has not been easy. You’ve endured countless hours of study, rigorous clinical rotations, and the challenge of transforming knowledge into care. And not to mention Dr. Franzel’s Binocular Vision classes! Now, you enter a profession that is constantly evolving—shaped by innovation, public health shifts, and global events that may test your resolve.

Resilience will be your most powerful tool. It is not simply the ability to endure hardship—it is the willingness to adapt, to grow, and to find opportunity in uncertainty. When a patient sits before you in distress, your role is not only to restore their sight but to bring clarity to their experience. Similarly, in life, your clarity of purpose will help you navigate even the most uncertain paths.

Optometry is a deeply human profession. You will care for individuals from every background, belief, and walk of life. Success will depend not just on your clinical expertise but on your

capacity to listen, to understand, and to honor the unique perspectives of those you serve.

Diversity is not just something to acknowledge—it is something to celebrate. You will encounter patients who speak different languages, hold different beliefs, and embody different life experiences. Your colleagues will come from paths far different from yours or mine. This diversity is not a challenge—it is our greatest strength. By embracing it, you will not only become better optometrists but better people.

As I reflect on my own journey, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunities this country has offered me—opportunities I once only dreamed of, despite the challenges I faced along the way. I know what it means to face setbacks, to question your direction, and to push forward when the path is unclear. Through hard work, determination, and belief in possibility, I was able to achieve what many call the American Dream. This Dream now awaits you! You have already demonstrated the intelligence, dedication, and compassion required to thrive. Whatever the future holds, trust in your abilities, believe in your vision, and continue striving for excellence.

So as you step into this new chapter, I leave you with two guiding principles:

1. Be resilient in the face of adversity.

Let every challenge become a lesson, every setback a catalyst for growth. Trust in your training, lean into your passion, and never lose sight of your purpose.

2. Celebrate and uphold diversity in all its forms.

Treat every patient and colleague with respect. Welcome perspectives different from your own. Remember: in the spectrum of human experience, every person has something valuable to teach you. Celebrate and uphold diversity in all its forms.

Treat every patient and colleague with respect. Welcome perspectives different from your own. Do not let skin color, nationality, gender, language, or accent cloud your judgment.

I'd like to share a story with you. Just three months after graduating, I was thrilled to land a job interview in the Denver area. But my excitement quickly turned to heartbreak when the Optometrist told me she couldn't offer me the position- because of my accent. Twenty years later, that same colleague reached out to learn why I had become so successful. She spent two days at my practice, observing and asking questions about how I built my business. I welcomed her warmly and shared everything she wanted to know. What if she had given me the chance and we could have built this enterprise together?! Remember: in the spectrum of human experience, every person has something valuable to teach you.

Today, you graduate not only as optometrists, but as visionaries. You carry the power to change lives—one patient at a time, one act of kindness at a time, one moment of resilience at a time.

Congratulations, Class of 2025. The world awaits—go forward, and see it in all its brilliance.

Thank you.