

Heroes for Life
Commencement Remarks - December 15, 2007
Colleges of Allied Health, Education and Human Services, Technology

The hit television show “Heroes” has brought the idea of ordinary people who do extraordinary things into our public consciousness. While not endowed with superhuman powers, we too know heroes who make a difference through their caring attitude, willingness to assist, and sacrifice for others. These heroes are everywhere, friends, family, teachers, or people in the public eye. As I relate the story of this hero, I encourage you to think about the heroes in your life.

Liviu Librescu, born 1930 in Romania, was imprisoned in a labor camp during World War II and sent to a ghetto with his family. Although as many as 380,000 Romanian Jews perished during this period, Liviu survived. After the war he studied engineering and science, becoming one of that country’s foremost aerospace engineers. In the 1970’s he refused to declare allegiance to Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian dictator, instead asking to emigrate to Israel, costing him his job and bringing years of uncertainty and persecution. With the help of Israel’s Prime Minister, Meachem Begin, he was finally allowed to go to Israel, where he joined the faculty at Tel Aviv University.

In 1984 he came to the United States on a sabbatical and stayed here. He is described as a demanding teacher, one who took a personal interest in his students, but also unwilling to compromise his expectations, standards, or values.

For the past 23 years Dr. Librescu taught at Virginia Tech. On April 16th when shooting began on that campus, Dr. Librescu barricaded the classroom door with his body, calmly telling his students to open the windows, remove the screens, and jump to safety. The last students to jump implored him to join them, but he held his position, making certain of their safety. In doing so he was struck five times by bullets and killed. Through his actions, a quiet 76-year old professor saved 32 student lives, not with a decision reasoned over weeks of discussion, but through an immediate and clear reflection of his values and beliefs. How many of us would have done the same?

Thankfully it is unlikely any of us will face the life or death challenge that confronted Liviu Librescu, but we can learn from his example. Ultimately lives are not measured by what we do for our self, but rather from what we do for others. This is a lesson worth remembering. My sincere hope for you is that you can become that person who makes a critical difference for others.

On behalf of our University I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment. As each of you sets out on the next step on your life and career I encourage you to remember the quiet example of Liviu Librescu and his willingness to place others before himself.

Congratulations and best wishes.

David L. Eisler
President