

Ferris State University
December 2006 Commencement
10:00 a.m. Ceremony

by David L. Eisler, President

As graduates you represent the collective hopes and dreams of our institution. Each of us at Ferris State University ~ faculty, staff, administration, and yes fellow students ~ looks to you as the result of our collective efforts. In some ways for me this occasion feels similar to the emotion one sometimes experiences as a parent when someone is leaving home to set out on their own. These are major crossroads that help define life. As a parent, friend, colleague, and yes, as teacher, you look at someone that you've tried to help guide, grow, and evolve and wonder if you've done enough, if there is some last piece of information or advice that you might give that might make a difference. Is there something that you've forgotten to say or do that will help?

My experience in those situations is that one looks into the eyes of that student and discovers that they've changed and that a relationship that has been defined as teacher and student has become one of friend or colleague. As an expression of our University's hopes for you I want to share one final piece of advice, something I've entitled "Make a Difference."

I often find inspiration in these words of Martin Luther King, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

I suggest you consider this not just treating everyone as equal, but believing that they are. Adopt the Golden Rule, to treat others as you would have them treat you. Instead of telling people what to do, consider asking more often, “How may I help you?” Learn to encourage and trust others. In trusting, think of the gardener who plants a seed, trusting that it will grow. What would be their success if they dug it up every few days to see how it was growing?

It is my fervent hope that you have learned more than just your academic studies here in college. I want each of you to have learned about the meaning of engagement, the need for volunteers, and the importance of service. The goal here is not just that you will make a difference in your community because of your academic education, but that you can a difference for humanity by truly caring about others. You should be the leaders for your community, helping others who are less fortunate.

This week I found this lesson in action in Manton, Michigan, a little town just north of Cadillac. I was visiting with a delightful 90-year old woman, whose kindness and support will help provide scholarships for many future students at Ferris State University. Lately she has experienced some health challenges, but none of those have dimmed her sparkling personality or the lively conversations we have during our visits.

For me Hilda is an example of a life well-lived. She studied two years at Ferris Institute in the 1930’s, earned her bachelor’s degree from the University of Chicago, and a master’s degree from Columbia. Beginning after the Second World War, she lived much of her adult life in France and retired to summers here and winters in Florida. Recently she sold her home in Florida and will live most of the year in Manton, living in the home she moved into at age 14.

All her life she has always been an activist, involved with politics and the environment, working to help others. Over dinner Wednesday I asked her what her plans were now. She looked me in the eye and said, “Well, I’ve noticed that there’s not much recycling here. I’m going to find a way to get that started here so that recycling is picked up along with our trash and we can make difference right here in Manton.”

How wonderful it must be, at age 90, to have a dream to transform your community. Driving home I realized that in this brief instant she had revealed one of her secrets to a life well-lived, engagement in helping others. It is this involvement and dreams that are her source of energy.

It is my hope that each of you will experience this thrill and challenge of engagement and that you are fortunate to live a life filled with meaning and substance. Each of us should be so powerfully motivated at age 90.

On behalf of our University I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment. As each of you sets out on the next step of your life and career you will face times of challenge, heartbreak, and disappointment. In those times when you might consider giving up, I’d encourage you to remember this wonderful 90-year old woman and her commitment to others. Hopefully each of us will take advantage of our opportunities to make a difference.