

**Dare to Dream**  
Commencement Address  
Southwestern Michigan College  
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Ferris State University

Thank you so very much for the opportunity to be with you today. It is an honor to be able to share your achievement with you and celebrate your success. As graduates you represent the hopes and dreams of Southwestern Michigan College. Each of your faculty, staff, administration, and yes, fellow students, sees in you the fulfillment of their collective efforts.

On such important occasions as this, your friends, teachers and parents look at you and see someone they've tried to help guide, to help grow and flourish, and they wonder if they've done enough. They wonder if there is some last piece of information or advice they might give that would make a difference. Is there something that they've forgotten to say or do that would help?

When I have stood on the stage at other commencements and handed graduates their diplomas, I have looked into their eyes and discovered that they have changed. They are no longer students, but friends and colleagues.

Before you head out to chart that new direction in your life, I want to share just a few thoughts that may be useful as you begin this next part of your journey.

**Dare to Dream**

There was a time when people believed the world was flat, that humans would never fly, that space travel would remain the stuff of science fiction. These realities changed as people dared to dream, to push back the boundaries of what was thought to be impossible.

I want to encourage you to go beyond the possible, to dream and do great things. Maybe you have been one of the best students in your classes; maybe you haven't. Who can tell which of you will make the next great breakthrough in science, in the arts, in world affairs? Consider these four teacher reports -

One: "...as a seven year school boy this young man is hopeless. His brain is addled and it is useless for him to attend school."

Two: "...although he has had only four months of school, he is very good with studies, but is a daydreamer and asks foolish questions."

Three: "...[he] is a unique member of the class. He is ten years old and is only just beginning to read and write. He shows signs of improving, but you must not set your sights too high on him."

Four: "...[he] is a very poor student. He is mentally slow, unsociable, and is always daydreaming. He is spoiling it for the rest of the class. It would be best if he were removed from the school at once."

Who was that hopeless 7-year-old boy with the addled brain? – Thomas Edison, inventor of the phonograph, the light bulb, motion pictures, and the holder of 1,093 patents.

Who was doing well with studies after 4 months of school, but daydreamed and asked foolish questions? – Abraham Lincoln, 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, the man many historians consider to be our greatest leader.

Who was 10 years old and only just beginning to show signs of improvement? – The 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson.

And who should have been removed from class because he was mentally slow, unsociable, and a very poor student? – Albert Einstein, the father of modern physics and winner of the 1921 Nobel Prize.

If each of these individuals went on to such great success, what is possible for you?

### **Make a Difference**

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

A life spent making a difference encompasses much more than just your personal success. A measure of how you answer Dr. King's persistent and urgent question will be found in the relationships you create and sustain. Achieving a balance among your career, your family, your friends and your community is one of the keys to happiness. Beyond that, the most profound example of helping others is when that help extends beyond the circle of those you already love and cherish.

Dr. King also wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Isn't this another way of saying that we should adopt the Golden Rule, that we should treat others as we would have them treat us? A well-rounded education helps us develop a sense of empathy for others, a desire not only to treat people as equals but to understand on a deeper level that we truly are equal.

It is my great hope that each of you has learned about the possibilities of your heart as well as the abilities of your brain. I hope you to have learned about the power of being engaged with society, the need to volunteer, and the importance of serving. You will make a difference in your community not simply because of your classroom education, but through the humanity you cultivate by helping others who are less fortunate.

For me there is a wonderful example of that type of commitment here at Southwestern Michigan College. His unswerving commitment to students has helped build a strong relationship between Southwestern Michigan College and Ferris State University. It is his efforts that have made possible the bachelor's degrees we will award today. At Ferris we partner with community colleges all over the state, from Escanaba to Port Huron, to Macomb, and yes to here in Dowagiac. Nowhere do we enjoy the strong support, the desire to build support through truly innovative thinking, and the commitment to student success that we find here at Southwestern Michigan College. Passionately leading this effort is your president, David Mathews and I am truly honored to consider him both a colleague and a friend. David I would ask you stand and accept our thanks.

### **Don't give up**

Each of you has a story that is special and my hope for you is that will be a memorable occasion, one of achievement and a milestone of success. I want to share two of those stories with you, as examples of how each of us is capable of extraordinary accomplishment.

This graduate first attended Southwestern Michigan College twenty years ago upon graduation from Marcellus High School, but was not successful. She then worked in a number of minimum wage and factory jobs. At that time a single mother, raising her son Brent alone, she worked at Eaton Corporation for ten years. Like many people in Michigan she found herself facing a downsizing situation. Seizing this opportunity, with the support of her husband Rick who she met five years ago, and a Michigan Works Scholarship she saw the opportunity to change her life and she did it. Attending school full-time she graduates today with her degree in early childhood, the first of eight children in her family to graduate from college. When I spoke with her yesterday she was at her internship in a kindergarten classroom in yes, Marcellus, having come full circle. Today she is uncertain what will happen next for her, but I believe she will in time achieve her dream, earn her teaching credential and join the teaching profession.

It is a pleasure to present to you Tammy Madison. I would ask that Tammy stand and be recognized. I would ask her family also stand and be recognized.

This second extraordinary person grew up right here in Dowagiac, graduating from Dowagiac High School. He joined the US Navy and is a Persian Gulf Veteran, having served on the battleship USS Missouri. After the service he worked in a series of factory jobs and did not think about school, not believing that he could make it. A single parent, with a young son, he moved to Atlanta and initially met with success. After a series of setbacks he was homeless with only enough for a ticket back home. In 2006 he found a job with Tyler Refrigeration and learned they would support his education here at SMC. This was his dream, to attend and succeed at school and to create a better life for as he says, his two beautiful sons. Today he has overcome all obstacles and accomplished the first step in his dreams, earning his degree. This fall he is headed for Western Michigan University to earn a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, the second step of his journey on his path toward law school. Throughout his studies he has found inspiration in

caring for his mother Wilma and his two sons LaVance Jr. and D'Andre. Many of you know him as someone who has helped and encouraged you.

I am honored to present to you LaVance Henry and would ask that he stand and be recognized. I would ask that his family also stand.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Over my career I have worked with many students, but I remember particularly the story of one young man who struggled to find his first position after college. Although his resume stretched several pages in length, it spoke of potential rather than experience. During his job search he met with disappointment and discouragement. Fifty-six carefully written letters of application were rejected by potential employers. Finally his persistence did pay off. His 57<sup>th</sup> application was for a teaching position at a small state university in Alabama. Seeking to get his foot in the door, he called the dean there, said he would be nearby and wanted to interview for the job. The dean agreed, interviewed the student, and hired him on the spot.

I know that story well because 31 years ago, almost to this day, I was that student. The dean was a legendary Alabama educator, John M. Long. I had the opportunity to work for him for 15 years and he influenced me and became a part of my life in ways I could never have imagined. Just as your mentors honor your achievements today, he and his wife, Mary Lynn, attended my inauguration as president at Ferris State University. Their presence was one of the highlights of that day.

We learn and remember much more from failure than from success. Before he was elected president, Abraham Lincoln – that day-dreaming and foolish student - was defeated for state legislature, failed in business, defeated for nomination to Congress, defeated in election for the Senate and defeated for nomination to be Vice President. Which effort of yours will be the one that brings you success? You won't know until you make that effort.

As you face the challenges of this next stage of your life and career, I challenge you to keep these ideals in mind –

- Dare to Dream
- Make a Difference
- Don't Give Up

I like to think of things this way...

**Once in a while, something comes along  
That marks a moment we remember as having forever changed our life**

... a door opens, we walk through and look back for that same opening  
It no longer exists

We become different...  
Indeed, you are different!!

Sometimes, you need to open the door yourself. As the Czech poet Miroslav Holub wrote

Go and open the door.  
Maybe outside there's  
A tree, or a wood,  
A garden  
Or a magic city.

Congratulations and best wishes to you, the Class of 2008!!