



Patrick F. Leahy

Undergraduate Commencement | May 16, 2015

I.

Well, congratulations, Graduates! You did it! Now, answer me this: Was the tassel worth the hassle? Before I address our most recent alumni, allow me to thank some people. First, let me thank the hardest working person here today, our sign language interpreter, Jamie Lynne Hill

Next, let me recognize both the Wilkes Civic Band under the direction of Professor Phil Simon and the Wilkes Chorus under the direction of Professor Steven Thomas. Thank you all for enriching this ceremony. Also, while I'm at it, I'd like to thank the unsung heroes of this weekend here at Wilkes — all of our colleagues in physical plant, public safety, and food service — for their hard work in preparing the campus for this celebration. Thank you.

I'd like to thank all of the parents. You parents are the individuals who helped to make this experience possible. Our students want you to know that they understand the sacrifices you have made, and it will all be worth it. The best is yet to come. You have supported, encouraged, and challenged your children. Their achievements today are your achievements, too. An old philosophy professor of mine once told me that there are three times in one's life when pure joy spreads across people's faces: brides and grooms on their wedding day, the first time parents hold their newborn babies, and parents on their kids' graduation day. Looking around today, I see in the parents' faces the wisdom of that statement.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of the Wilkes professors, coaches, and other mentors to our graduates who are here today. You are the individuals who accompanied our graduates on their Wilkes journey. Each of you has dedicated the one life you have to live to making your students successful. One student told me: "Wilkes is a place where faculty and staff members don't give up on you." Another student said this about one of his coaches: "He didn't have to do 90% of the things he has done for me. He was my father away from home." On behalf of all the graduates, let me extend a sincere thank you to all of the faculty and staff here at Wilkes. Graduates, find a special way on this Commencement Day, or in the days ahead, to thank these individuals — your parents, your professors, anyone who has taken an interest in your success — for gracing your life. Students don't get to a graduation day without a lot of people supporting them. Tell them how much you appreciate them.

II.

The tendency for a university president on a sacred occasion such as this is to try to sum it all up for you. Sum it all up? Sum up perhaps the most productive, interesting, meaningful period of your life in just a few moments? How is that possible? How would I adequately explain the "college vibe" that the Student Union Building offers? Or, would anyone other than a Wilkes Colonel fully understand: Club

Day? Casino Night? The Big Event? Films at Movies 14? Bowling at Chako's? Monday night wings at Bart & Urby's? Thursday night pitchers at Rodano's? We are the small school with the huge opportunities. We are the place where you can be both a student and an athlete. We are a school with such a strong alumni base that many of you have received career advice, internships, or even full-time jobs from fellow alumni. We are the place, as one student put it, where we "belong." And, none of it was possible without your friends and fellow classmates. These are the people who made your experience here so special. We are a community where, as one student recently told me, "when I was falling and crashing, everyone was there to lift me up." Quite possibly, the best friends you ever make were made here at Wilkes. I hear it from our alumni all the time. Stay in close touch with each other. Dance at each other's weddings. Serve as godparents to each other's kids. Celebrate each other's successes. Comfort each other during life's difficult moments. As the president of my undergraduate institution told me many years ago: "Don't waste love."

III.

It's been a great run over the past few years. You have come a long way, changing in ways that you could not have imagined four short years ago, but this is just the start. After all, today is Commencement Day, not Completion Day. We celebrate today a new beginning, not an ending. We prefer to think of it as the first day of the rest of your life, not the last day of your time at Wilkes University. So, in addition to talking about your last four years, I'd also like to turn your attention to your next four years, or your next 50 years for that matter.

The Washington Post exclaimed a couple years ago: "Good news! The next 50 years are going to be amazing." Your next 50 years will illustrate the triumph of the human spirit: unprecedented medical advances, unimaginable technology, space exploration, and on and on. How might you participate in these breakthroughs? But, your next 50 years could also see unprecedented human suffering: environmental degradation, food and water shortages, unprecedented inequality. What will you do about this? You now have an opportunity, a responsibility really, as an educated person, to shape, or at least influence, this period. Our world needs you, perhaps now more than ever. As the Bible implores, "To whom much is given, much is expected." Others have added, "Not that you be burdened with such responsibility, but find fulfillment." Find that fulfillment in your life. I hope your next 50 years are amazing. Remember that most of us older people would trade places with you in a minute.

IV.

So, as we conclude these exercises on your Commencement Day together, what advice can I offer to each of you as you look out over the next 50 amazing years? Here it is. It's very simple. Dream. For many of you, this Commencement Day is the fulfillment of a dream: to graduate from an American, private university - the best education at this level in the world, an education afforded to much less than one half of one percent of your peer group around the world. When you received your diploma, you became a college graduate. Congratulations on achieving this first dream. And, if it's not really your dream, then it may be your parents' and grandparents'. For you first-generation college graduates, this may be a dream literally generations in the making. Today, you at once honor your parents and grandparents and blaze a trail for every future generation by resetting the trajectory of your family. I hope you first-generation graduates will stop and think for a minute how you've just contributed to your family. Again, congratulations! But, I hope the realization of this dream today simply makes possible what it is you really dream about. Start today — on your Commencement Day — to dream anew. Dreams give life purpose and meaning. Woodrow Wilson said, "We grow great by dreams. All big men (and women) are dreamers. They see things in the soft haze of a spring day or in the red fire

of a long winter's evening. Some of us let these dreams die, but others nourish and protect them; nurse them through bad days till they bring them to the sunshine and light which comes always to those who sincerely hope that their dreams will come true."

So, if you plan a career in law, dream of becoming the partner in a major law firm, like your trustee greeter, Gene Roth. If you plan a career in education, dream of dedicating 35 years to a single place, like retiring dean, Barbara King. If you plan a career in business, dream of creating a bunch of businesses, like your fellow alum and trustee, Jason Griggs. Whatever you plan to do, dream. And, it is our hope here at Wilkes that your dreams, in one way or another, involve serving others. That's one way to take a dream and make it big. Put it to use serving others. Some people will tell you that your dreams are not possible. Do not listen to them! When the world tries to tell you that your dreams are unrealistic, think of this day — your Commencement Day — and your honorary degree recipient, Seymour Holtzman. Seymour Holtzman started with nothing, but he had two great assets: a dream and a great partner. In fact, Evie Holtzman is herself an alumna of Wilkes University. As you now know, he has had a sterling career as a businessman and entrepreneur. In the 1950s, while he was in school here at Wilkes, he sensed a business opportunity to teach wealthy couples to dance, so he taught himself to ballroom dance and started a business that would help him through school. In the 1980s, he sensed investment opportunities in the former Soviet block countries, so he became one of the first Westerners to invest in Eastern Europe. In the 1990s, he sensed that the Internet would revolutionize retailing, so he started an online business. Not bad for a kid from Wilkes- Barre! Imagine if he had listened to all of the people who said his dreams weren't possible. Thank you, Seymour, for being here today as an example to our graduates of what's possible when you dream. Eleanor Roosevelt said, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." All of you have the capacity to dream beautiful dreams. I hope you will. And, I hope you will start today — your Commencement Day.

V.

Sum it all up in just a few minutes? It's just not possible for me. So, I leave it to the poets, in particular to the great American poet, Walt Whitman, to do that. Over a century ago, Whitman wrote a piece that a movie of my generation, *Dead Poets Society*, and an electronic device of your generation, the iPad, has helped to make famous. It bears repeating today. Whitman said: "The question, O me! So sad, recurring--What good amid these, O me, O life? Answer. That you are here--that life exists, and identity; That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse." That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?

Congratulations, graduates. It has been our privilege here at Wilkes to be a part of your life these past few years. We will miss you very much.