

Wor-Wic Commencement

May 13, 2009

Clay Whitlow

President Hoy, Chairman Lawrence, Members of the Board of Trustees, Family members and guests, and most important, Members of the Wor-Wic Community College Class of 2009, I am honored to have been invited to speak at this evening's commencement.

I congratulate the class of 2009, THE GREATEST CLASS IN THE HISTORY OF WOR-WIC COMMUNITY COLLEGE, for your accomplishments in reaching this milestone in your lives. I know that most of you have not had an easy road to get here tonight. Sometimes we compare college with the "real world" as in "now that you have finished college you have to go out into the "real world." You are already in the real world. Many of you have had to balance family responsibilities, work, and other commitments while pursuing your goal of higher education. You stuck with it, with help from family and friends, you put in the time and effort to be successful and we are here to celebrate your accomplishments this evening. I salute each and every one of you.

As I said, tonight marks the celebration of a milestone in your lives, but, of course, much lies ahead of you. As you go forward, I know that you will find the lessons learned at Wor-Wic Community College invaluable, whether you are transferring to another college or university, or immediately entering the work force.

I want to take a few minutes this evening to share with you some observations that, hopefully, you will find useful in the days ahead. I started out with a list of 10 things, but you will be happy to know, I cut it down to three. Let me also say that I don't claim to have always lived up to what I know is true, but I don't think that make these comments any less valid.

First: Follow your heart in choosing a career and the rest will take care of itself.

Second: Life is about your priorities.

Third: Be a bridge builder.

FIRST, WORK SHOULD BE ABOUT THE HEART NOT THE HEAD

Most of us have to work. In choosing what sort of work to do, what career to pursue, above all other considerations make it something you love. I've known people who say they hate to go to work every day, but they do it because they have to make a living for themselves, for their family. If you assume that we spend at least 40 hours a week at work, about half your waking

hours, it's very sad to spend that time unhappy, unfulfilled. "But I don't have a choice" people say. You always have a choice. Let me repeat, you always have a choice.

When I was in high school, I decided to go to college and major in chemical engineering. Why chemical engineering? Frankly, to my 17 year old mind, it sounded good; it sounded impressive. It sounded like something that paid good money, and I had no talent for basketball. I had no idea what engineers actually did on a daily basis. Both my parents started out as school teachers. I could have aspired to be a teacher, but, frankly, that sounded boring, mundane. I thought my parents would be **extra** proud of me if I became an engineer. It turned out to be a disaster! I didn't do so well in college, not because I wasn't smart enough, but because I had no **passion** for engineering. But I kept going, and eventually earned my engineering degree, because I thought: "well I have all these credit hours in engineering, I can't change now; I have no choice but to keep going." I went to work as an engineer and stayed only a year before going to law school.

The co-founder of Apple, Steve Jobs, said: Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life." I was trying to live the life I thought I **should** live. It took me a while, but I finally found where my heart was, in education, particularly community colleges. At each step along the way, I made money a secondary consideration for what I felt was my true path. Follow your heart. The most important thing is not the money or the perceived prestige, but whether you wake up in the morning looking forward to going to work.

SECOND, IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS LIFE IS ABOUT YOUR PRIORITIES

The fast pace of change has accelerated our personal lives as well as work life. Since we can communicate with each other instantly all the time, many people are flooded with messages every minute of the day, even when they are sleeping. I'm still not sure exactly what "twittering" is. This creates a sense of being busy, a sense of stress, even anxiety. Simply put we feel "busy" all the time.

One of the most common expressions in our culture is "I don't have time." Someone asks you to do something and you respond, "I'd like to but I don't have time." We all say that, on a weekly, maybe daily, basis. The fact is we all have the same 24 hours of time every day. How we choose to use it is up to us.

As a child, I couldn't wait to grow up, especially to turn 16 so I could get my driver's license. Then when we get older, we yearn to be younger; we lose our health trying to make money and advance; then spend our money trying to restore our health. By thinking anxiously about the future, we forget the present, such that we live neither for the present nor the future.

Things are moving so fast, if you don't stop to examine your priorities, what is really important to you, like family, you run the risk of being a spectator at your own life. Years go by and you wonder where they went and what was accomplished.

FINALLY, BE A BRIDGE BUILDER

The last thought I want to leave with you is: now that you have achieved one of your goals, remember to reach back for someone else. Fannie Lou Hamer, a pioneer in the civil rights movement during the 60s, said:

“There are two things we should all remember: Never forget where we came from and always remember the bridges that carried us over.”

None of us achieves anything worthwhile without help along the way. That has certainly been true for me. I’m sure each one of you can reflect on that quote and think about the people: family members, teachers, others, who have helped you get where you are tonight.

You are celebrating the achievement of an important goal this evening. You have in a sense crossed over to become a college graduate. I urge you not to forget to reach back and build a bridge to help someone else get across. That someone else might be a younger sibling or your child or someone you don’t even know at this moment that you may have an opportunity to help.

I urge you to Reflect on your priorities and be guided by them. Follow your heart in choosing your career and the rest will take care of itself.

Thank you for allowing me to share your special day. I salute each one of you, and with you go my fondest hopes for your happiness and immense success in all that you do. I know you will strive to make this a better world and I know that the education you have received here at Wor-Wic Community College has given you a priceless beginning on the road to success. You have earned something — **an education**, that can never be taken away from you. Money comes and goes; good fortune is sometimes followed by misfortune. But what you learn, what is in your head and your heart, can never be taken away.

Congratulations and may God bless each and every one of you.