Huntington High School’s 152nd Commencement

Superintendent James W. Polansky’s Address

There are so many things that can be said to these fine young people upon their commencement. All of you soon-to-be graduates have surely experienced life’s ups and downs during your first 17 or 18 years. Some of those “ups” have been way up. I imagine some of those “downs” have been low. Indeed, your lives will continue to take twists and turns.

You all know such names as Albert Einstein, Bill Gates, J.K. Rowling and Michael Jordan; but do you know what they have in common aside from the fact that they are among the world’s greatest success stories? Fact – they failed miserably at some point in their lives. Yes, each drastically muffed his/her chances at some point. This evening, I’d like to pay tribute to those who never give up, who continue to fight, and who are able to gather their energies to overcome obstacles – some small, some large.

“Success” – each of us wants it, and the sooner the better. But the concept of “success” takes on a different context for each of us; word of advice - do not let others define the concept for you. Use the tool at your disposal, a tool more powerful than any computer, smartphone or other digital device – your brain. A quote from Michelangelo about his legacy … “If you knew how much work went into it, you wouldn’t call it genius.” First, your brain needs knowledge as much as food and oxygen. Desire and ambition mean that you will have to work both smarter and harder to gain this knowledge. Secondly, your brain is hard wired to endure. Indeed, obstacles may force you to broaden your determination. Third,
your brain accepts failure as a step toward success. Learn from the failure. Accept it as part of the journey to success.

The beginning of any work is often easy. But after some time, it is routine for those involved in the work to be faced with challenges and/or setbacks. They may choose to view the challenges and setbacks as end-point “failures” and, as a result, stop the journey in its tracks.

When difficulties surround us, we must be patient – not always easy in an age where technology more readily promotes a greater degree of “immediate gratification.” But mere patience is not enough; we must persevere with respect to the efforts leaving toward goal achievement. Perseverance is the mother of good luck. Perseverance, when steadily practiced even by the most humble, will rarely fail to bring about success.

In the absence of patience and perseverance, other qualities such as intelligence and experience may not be of much value toward achieving success. Great works of literature and art and great invention are the results of patience and perseverance. Had their creators been impatient and indolent, most of them would not have seen the light of the day.

If we read the lives of great individuals, we find that almost all of them became “great” with the help of patience and perseverance. Albert Einstein couldn’t speak until he was four or write until he was seven, making his teachers think he was handicapped. He was even expelled from school. He ended up winning the Nobel Prize for physics.
Before building his empire, Bill Gates started a business called Traf-O-Data, which went nowhere, and he dropped out of Harvard. But his passion for computers and his vision of technological opportunity led him to start Microsoft and we all know what happened from there.

J.K. Rowling may be rolling in quite a bit of Harry Potter dough today, but before she published the series of novels, she was nearly penniless, severely depressed, and trying to raise a child on her own while attending school. She went from depending on welfare to being one of the richest women in the world in a span of only five years through her hard work and determination. And those who wish to “be like Mike” may not realize that he was not always viewed as a magician on the court. He was cut from his high school basketball team.

These accounts represent a much larger compilation of eventual “greats” with similar stories. And for all the future “greats” sitting in front of me this evening – the accomplished students, researchers, musicians, artists, athletes, and philanthropists, who have weaved so much into the fabric of the Huntington community, remember that it will not always be easy.

Along these lines, I’ll leave our graduates with three general suggestions. (1) Stay connected with your purpose. Maintain the vision of your desired end results, whatever they may be. (2) Believe in yourselves (very powerful), and recognize that more than half the battle is in your own minds. If you believe in yourselves, others will too. (3) No matter what your purpose or approach, retain your humility. That means never forget where you came from. Never forget that there are people less fortunate than you in the world. Never think that these people are any less than
you simply because they enjoy fewer privileges and remember that you have the potential and ability to help. The actions of a person with humility are guided not by money or prestige, but by the heart.

Now go out into the world and take it by storm. Do it with conviction and with compassion. I have no doubt that you will continue to make your former teachers and administrators, your families and friends and, most importantly, yourselves proud.

Happiness, health and good fortune to you all for many, many years to come.