Good Morning!

Dr Vaughn, Mrs Vaughn

All VIP salutations

And our special guest, Mrs Gladys Dunn, please raise your hand, where are you? Not here, by the time I am finished with this speech, you will all be Glad it’s Done.

And most importantly, the University of Tampa Class of 2023!!! Let’s hear it. Today marks a significant milestone in your lives and I congratulate each and every one of you on your achievement, especially our valedictorian, Ms. Shot GeePartay. Did I pronounce that right, no? Oh it’s Chat GPT. I kid. Congratulations to the real valedictorian xXXXyyyy

My name is Jeff Drushal, University of Tampa Class of 1989. It is my great honor and privilege to be here with you today as we celebrate the graduation of the class of 2023. It seems like only yesterday when I graduated as part of the class of 1989. Our commencement speaker was Florida Congressman Connie Mack from a baseball royal family and a political dynasty. I apologize for the downgrade. It was hot. It was in the traffic circle on the UT Campus. We may or may not have had bottles of champagne hidden under our gowns, but only for hydration. It was a safety thing. This obvi pre insta and there is no proof unless it is a polaroid photo.

I had the opportunity to serve as your commencement speaker and I jumped at it….and here is why…. UT changed my life. This is not hyperole. It is deeply, deeply meaningful for me to serve as your speaker today. Exactly 12,944 days….. 33 years and 1 day, I was sitting in my uncomfortable folding chair with only one obstacle between me and walking across the stage: the guest speaker. 1989: Let’s put that in perspective.

* The cost of a gallon of gas in May of 1989 was 90 cents, which meant you could put $2 of gas in your 1967 VW Karmann Ghia at the gas station across the street where you all buy your vapes and it would last you a week.
* A gallon of milk cost 2 dollars and 34 cents.
* The number one song was “Like a Prayer” by Madonna, and she still looked like Madonna
* The #1 TV show was Roseanne, which has been rebooted and had spinoffs….spinoft? Is that a word?
* The most popular movie was Batman. I don’t know which makes me seem older….33 years or six different Batmans…Batmen? Whichever.
* There were only two superhero movies, Superman and Batman.
* You could see North Boulevard from the patio of Plant Hall
* UT was a small, sleepy, relatively unknown private school. There were about 3,000 students at UT.
* Neither of the dorms I lived in exist!
* The fraternity all star football teams from UT and USF played in the “Bud Bowl” in Pepin Rood Stadium and beer was served.
* Parking on campus was plentiful!

Back to my story, I cannot underestimate or really adequately describe how this institution changed my life. I was an Army brat, always the new kid in school. My dad retired from MacDill Air Force Base in 1981. He did that my brother and I could stop being the new kid in school and so we could go to the same high schools for 3 years. I went to Chamberlain high school, formerly the Chiefs. I had a mildly successful time in high school. I played football. We went to the state Championship. Arena Football MVP and former NFL Coach Jay Gruden was the quarterback. I take credit for more sacks of Jay Gruden than any other football player, of course, I was on the offensive line and responsible for preventing that. I was in the band…yes there is one of those meme-like band photos of me with two poses in one somewhere out there. I played bass clarinet, the most manly and intimidating member of the clarinet family. Goodish grades, goodish SAT score. I then went to Hillsborough Community College, or as we call it in Tampa, Yale on Dale, took my classes and worked at the Chili’s out in Carrollwood. My dad got a job in LA so I went to Southern California going to yet another JUCO. In California in the San Fernando Valley, I worked in yet another Chili’s restaurant. I went to junior college, the students were rich kids and into the LA party scene. The restaurant staff was heavy into drugs so I just kept my head down went to school. I had no plan and no direction, I just knew I was supposed to go to college. I was such a poor fit in LA. I had no interest in engaging in anything during this year, which was my sophomore year. This was also the time my older brother Jon graduated from UT. Then, clarity hit: I needed to fight to get back to Tampa. It is funny how having little money and no options provides clarity. My grades were slightly above average, and I like to work hard but that was about all I had going for me. So what do you do in 1986 when you're all out of money and options? Cue the music “Be All that you can, Be, in the AAAARRRMMY ” You call the Army! So I went to ROTC basic camp and I fought and fought and fought to get a two-year ROTC scholarship back to the University of Tampa. And..I failed. I performed exceptionally well in this camp, which was honestly six weeks of training and leadership evaluations. But I was 3 credits short of qualifying for the scholarship. It was SOUL CRUSHING. When I found out, I went around the side of the building and full on ugly cried. It was the lowest point in my life. After talking with the school, I found that the Army training I just went through had college credit value. It was awarded and I got a scholarship in the next round of applications. I found out while I was literally on the road from California to Florida in my 1981 VW Rabbit Convertible. I literally had no plan what I was going to do in Florida if I didn’t get the scholarship.

In 1987, I started as a junior at UT. I showed up from my 6 weeks of Army training at Fort Knox Kentucky, routinely road marching on roads that contained the hills referred to as heartbreak, misery, and agony…Google it, it is a thing, as my daughter will find out in a month. Head shaved, 165 pounds at 6”2. I immediately earned the name Ickabod after Ickabod Crane from “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” Who I later learned was not extremely handsome and charismatic, but instead, just tall and skinny.

When I showed up on campus for classes, for ROTC, and for my fraternity, Sigma Phi Epsilon, RIP, I was blown away by the quality of the young people here. I went from working with coked-out restaurant workers to studying with HS class presidents, college athletes, Resident Assistants, Student Government Reps, UT Diplomats. I went back to my yearbook and between the fraternity and ROTC, these two groups held about 40% of these positions on campus. This was my new peer group. And with this came new expectations and a different kind of peer pressure. The pressure to excel and to make a difference. The fraternity was a fraternity of values and of value. SIG EP was fraternity of the year for 4 years running and had the highest GPA on campus. ROTC was over 220 cadets, had its own set of expectations and instilled values. It was academically challenging for me. I had great professors in the Business School like Dr. Leon Hoke, Dr, Gil Joseph, a young firebrand you may know, Dr. Ron Vaughn, and even Dr. Jeffries, who I should also note was my 8th Grade history teacher at Buchanan Jr. High School. Outside of the business school was the legendary Tampa artist Joe Testa Secca, no fan of my paintings, but a great teacher and coach. I was pushed out of my comfort zone. I learned how to study, how to apply myself, how to be part of a team, how to be responsible. The curriculum was intellectually challenging and all manual! A computer was harder to find than on- campus dorms for a senior. Too soon?

So let’s contrast this with your experience. Enrollment is 8,300 students. UT is a top 15% school in undergraduate education, 17th and 20th in entrepenurship studies by Princeton Review. A top-ranked MBA program. The top tier of Universities in the Southeast by US News and World Report. Multiple NCAA Division II Championships, all during the tenure of the now not so young firebrand, Dr. Ron Vaughn.

You are, for the most part, GEN Z. The first digitally native generation. Computer savvy and smartphone enabled. The types of adversity you faced are much different that those of previous generations. You grew up as children of the great recession of 2008. The double edged sword of digital enablement provides challenges with relationships. And then we get to COVID. In my opinion, COVID wrecked your college experience. Remote learning, no gatherings, social distancing, mask mandates. Punitive policies for violations. You had to show determination, diligence, resilience, patience, compassion, and understanding. You worked very hard to not contract or transmit the disease, but also to not allow it to define your college experience. I believe the impact of these events may not be understood until you all are out in the workforce and have families to raise.

You bring these challenges into your UT experience. UT is rich in resources, opportunities, and has an incredibly supportive environment. I am amazed by the incredible breadth of opportunities with which you can be involved. So many clubs! And if you don’t see one you want, start your own! Rich resources to study whatever you want to study. An entrepreneurship center that is second to none. I am in awe whenever I visit this campus. Congratulations to Dr. Vaughn and the incredible faculty and staff at UT for building this incredible university into what it is today.

So now we get to the part of the delivery where I give advice. There is significant risk here of ending up as a meme of how GEN X doesn’t understand GEN Z yada yada yada or some derisive “okay boomer” comment. I make these comments not as a critique of the student body, but as a list of lessons learned from years of working, living, raising a family, and trying my best to be a good person.

* Balance!!! Life is like a triangle with family, work, and physical and mental health at the vertices (that’s pointy parts for you non math majors). It is not an isosceles triangle. It changes shape based on what is going on with your life. You have to provide care and feeding to your family, your work, and your physical and mental health at all times. However, if you have to surge for something work related, something will have to give. If you have a family situation that you must attend to, something will have to give. The triangle changes shape based on what is going on in your life. You should always strive to have balance in the three areas. Don’t give any part of the triangle, anyone, or anything too much power over you. Drugs, alcohol, vape, work, drama-centric friends, toxic coworkers, toxic family, your phone, Fortnite, Minecraft, these can skew the triangle. You are your own master, so be your own master.
* Always be hustling. I rose to the rank of major general, the top less than 1% of Army officers make it to, by always taking the hardest job available, in the most challenging environments. When I did this, it skewed my triangle a little bit but it was only temporary. Always have your mind set on the next level. Oh, I am at Publix bagging groceries? I want to stock shelves, then cashier. Oh, I am at Chilis washing dishes? I want to move through the whole kitchen to the grill, then wait tables, then tend bar. Oh, I’m in the Army? it’s all laid out for me. Become the most indispensable employee. Not what’s now? It’s what’s next?
* Be humble. Eliminate I and me from your vocabulary and replace them with we and us, unless you are in a job interview and they ask you what YOU did.
* Treat all people with dignity and respect. If you read the news, our nation is challenged in this regard right now. Spend a lot of time listening to other people’s stories and opinions. Listen to understand, not to respond. Being in a discussion doesn’t automatically mean you are in an argument to be won or lost. Whether at work or at play, people won’t remember your significant work achievements, awards, your school achievements, or how much you increased sales, boosted income or whatever, what they will remember is how you made them feel, whether you understood them, whether you trusted them, and how you treated them under periods of increased adversity.
* Relationships matter. In your personal life, professional life or wherever, always introduce yourself to someone before you need something from them….I don’t mean in the same meeting. I mean well in advance. Spend time helping others achieve their goals; you never know when you will need their help. In the workplace, we will all commit a process foul at one time or another. Have the relationship in place beforehand to help you negotiate the foul!
* Don’t drift, I spent many years drifting, then I got married. Don’t just have a plan with some un thought out end state of where you want to be physically, financially, emotionally, and intellectually. It’s a commonly asked question…”what are your goals?” Goals are only words without a concrete strategy to meet them and a method of holding yourself accountable for executing the strategy. I don’t know who said it, but they are brilliant “don’t be surprised at the results you don’t get from the work that you didn’t put in.” Have a plan, put in the work, and hold yourself accountable for the results.
* Understand your values and commit to modelling them in your personal and professional life.
* Prioritize. When we were executing the evacuation of refugees for Afghanistan, The Central Command Commanding General, Marine General Frank McKenzie told me daily, “I can get you any resource you need, except time.” Time is the only thing of which the universe can’t give you more. You must prioritize the things that you think are important. When I am mentoring young people whether at work or school, when I hear “I don’t have the time.” My response is always “let’s be honest here, don’t tell me you don’t have time, just tell me you have higher priorities.” That often will reframe the conversation about how people spend their time. Inventory your time and find out how much of it you are wasting. Oh, I didn’t finish my speech, the script says Insert Fortnite, Minecraft, and pointless Youtube video joke here.

So we covered my story, how UT changed my life, and the opportunities UT had to change yours. Hopefully upon reflection you will feel the same way. We covered some advice I have for you graduating and entering the work force. I will post the comments on linked in this weekend. Join my network if you need a copy.

Congratulations to the class of 2023, your future is bright. May God Bless you and your families as you venture forward.

God Bless the University of Tampa

God bless America.

Now let’s make some danged graduates!