

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

By

Kristen J. Price, MD, FCCP

Professor and Chair, Department of Critical Care

MD Anderson Cancer Center

President Vaughn

Members of the Board of Trustees

Faculty, Staff and Students

Members of the graduating class of 2011

Parents, Family and Friends

Distinguished Guests

I cannot begin to tell you all what an honor it is to be here and I humbly thank you, President Vaughn for inviting me to deliver the 130th Commencement Address for this truly amazing University. And it is even more special to me, as 30 years ago almost to the very day, I donned a cap and gown and graduated on the lawn of Plant Park. The four years I spent here were among the happiest of my life and I have carried these fond memories with me throughout my adult life. I am awestruck at the growth of the university since my graduation and I thank everyone for the hospitality you have shown me.

When I got the invitation to speak to you, I was thrilled. I couldn't wait to get home and share the news with my husband and children. I pulled into the driveway, burst through the back door, and found Claire and Ryan, my two youngest children in middle school doing their homework on the kitchen table. I enthusiastically announced my good fortune, and instead of the "WOW, THAT'S AWESOME MOM" or something to that effect as I was expecting, the dialog went something like this:

"Hey kids, I have the best news. I've been asked to give the graduation speech at my alma mater, UT." No responses. Scarlet, our golden retriever seemed genuinely jubilant about my news, so I thought perhaps they were so engrossed in their studies that they didn't hear me. I repeated my announcement. Nothing again....So I asked, "Aren't you excited for me?" And that's when Ryan said, "Well yeah, but you're not famous mom." Claire's response followed:

“Yeah, I thought only famous people like Oprah and Presidents are asked to give graduation speeches.” Shortly after that, my sixteen year old son came home from high school. So I said, “Eric, guess what? The University of Tampa called me today and asked me to be the speaker for the graduation in May.” His first response was, “That’s really cool.” I instantly felt better...until his next response a second later, “You’ll do great, but don’t try to be funny...no offense mom, but you’re really not funny.” So I tried my luck by calling my two remaining family members, unfortunately without success. Earl, my husband of 26 years, is an interventional cardiologist and he was scrubbed in the Cardiac Catheterization Lab. Elise, my oldest daughter, is a pre-Vet major at Texas A&M, and she was in her Animal Science Lab. Neither could be reached for comment!

So I did what I should have done in the first place – I called my mother! And as I expected, she was ecstatic and burst into tears of joy. She spent the next few minutes extolling all of my virtues and the many reasons she was proud of me, but then she had to hang up so she could call of my living relatives and every friend, teacher, or passerby who has ever known me! So graduates, my first message to you is, no matter how far you go from here, **call your mothers. Call your mothers often!** They love you unconditionally. And since tomorrow is Mother’s Day, let’s take a moment to honor all of the moms in the audience!

As I talked with individuals at the university to prepare for your commencement address, three words were relayed to me consistently, KEEP IT BRIEF! So I’ve given much thought about what words of inspiration I could share with you in the few moments we have together. And since apparently I am neither famous nor funny, the pressure is really on! To be quite honest, I have no idea who delivered my own commencement speech thirty years ago and in all likelihood, you will not remember me much past this day. But I hope, for this moment in time I can impart some of the wisdom I have gained over the last thirty years on to you as you begin your journey.

First. Your generation has been dubbed Generation Y or the “Echo Boomers” because many of you are the children of Baby Boomers, like me. The characteristics of your generation are generally marked by an increased use of and familiarity with communications, media, and digital technologies. You text and tweet and Facebook each other. We played outside, talked face to face or on land lines, and wished for a color TV – which by the way, only had three local channels which were changed manually on the dial. You use the internet effortlessly, with features such as Skype and instant messaging, connecting you instantly and continuously with family and friends. We wrote letters, mailed photographs, and visited relatives and friends on vacations. Your ease with technology gives you a tremendous advantage as you use these resources to move forward. But I am going to ask you to remember this. Never underestimate the impact that a kind word can have on another human being, stranger or not. Never underestimate the impact that the extension of your hand to someone in need can have. I have the honor of running the largest Intensive Care Unit at the number one ranked cancer center in the world. I have been privileged to experience the incredible joy of caring for critically ill cancer patients and watching them get better. I have also been privileged to share in a family’s unimaginable grief when a loved one is lost. In my profession, the art of being a good physician is sharing in these emotions personally with patients and their families. No matter what field you

enter, let the art of your profession lie in the way you treat and interact with others. Life is a precious gift. Be grateful.

Second. Your generation is also described as strong-willed, passionate, and optimistic. What great qualities those are! You have grown up in a world with planned, organized activities. You have great expectations and you are known for expecting to get what you want. But this is where it gets problematic. The world you are about to go out into is not always structured and organized. In fact, it is often the exact opposite. Keep your great expectations, but know that the world does not give you **what** you want, **when** you want it. But here is where your optimism will serve you well. Some of you will immediately enter the work force. In all likelihood, the first job you take will not be the ideal job you had envisioned. As a matter of fact, did you know that the average “Gen Y’er” changes jobs an average of 29 times throughout his or her lifetime? And, the average time in one job is just slightly over one year! I guarantee that the Baby Boomers in the audience are as surprised as I am about that. But I am going to ask you to remember this. Appreciate the job you do have, and do it well, with integrity every day. Many people who desperately need to work are unemployed. Continue to stay focused on your overall goal but learn from the experiences of the job you are doing, and equally as important, learn from the jobs others do alongside you. One day I struck up a conversation with one of our housekeeping staff and thanked her for the job she does keeping the ICU clean. She looked puzzled and told me it was her job. I pointed out that she has one of the most important jobs in the entire hospital. She looked even more puzzled. I told her that by keeping the ICU rooms clean she is reducing the risk of infection that our critically ill cancer patients are so susceptible to. I don’t know that anyone had ever told her that. There is value in **ALL** work. Be humble.

My third and final point. You have been born into a more culturally diverse environment, and you are more tolerant of differences than previous generations. Your generation is also known for caring about the world and its problems. And doesn’t it appear that the world certainly has its share of problems of these days? I suspect there are some commencement speakers who will paint a gloomy and dismal picture of the world college graduates are about to enter. I choose not to. Unfortunately, every generation in history has encountered the ills of the world in some fashion or another. But I would like you to remember this. I believe that greatness is achieved through selfless service to anyone or any situation in need. As you leave today, I ask you to go beyond yourself and the organized, structured world you have lived in for the past twenty plus years. There will be people just outside of your front door who are in dire need of help, and there will be people all across the globe who are victims of natural disasters and unspeakable crimes against humanity. You will know this because you are the technology generation and you are connected to every corner of the world through the internet. Allow that information to motivate you to give back any way you can to those less fortunate. Volunteer often. You are the generation of optimism and great expectations for your future. Be the generation of optimism and great expectations for those in need. Be selfless.

In closing, I want to again sincerely thank all of you for this opportunity today. I congratulate each and every one of you on your academic achievement and wish you every success in your future endeavors. And I leave you with one last thought.

Call your mothers. Often!