



**Washington and Lee High School
Commencement Address**

Richard V. Hurley, UMW President

June 16, 2012

It is truly an honor to share in this joyous occasion with you—for several reasons. I was delighted when Mr. White asked me to speak because, as many of you may know, your principal is himself a distinguished graduate of the University of Mary Washington. We are exceedingly proud to call David White, along with his highly accomplished wife, Dierdra, outstanding alumni of UMW.

In addition, there is a very special relationship between our university and Washington and Lee High School. You see, we are connected through both the James Farmer Scholars Program and the Rappahannock Scholars Program. The James Farmer Scholars Program, named in honor of the distinguished Civil Rights leader who taught history at Mary Washington, and the Rappahannock Scholars Program, a partnership between UMW and select high schools in the Northern Neck region, are tangible evidence of UMW's commitment to providing educational opportunities to students from this area. We are proud of this longstanding relationship with the students and families of Westmoreland County.

I want to recognize and thank the family members who are here today. Your support and encouragement have made this day possible for these outstanding young men and women. Most importantly, you have nourished their spirits and molded their character.

Here on the stage today, I can feel the energy and the anticipation of celebration—a celebration of which you are richly deserving. So I will move forward quickly to my remarks.

I believe that your high school graduation is one of the greatest events of your young lives. Some of you will be heading off to college in the fall—to a four-year institution a community college. Others of you will be enlisting in the military to serve our country, or perhaps going directly to work. But regardless of your immediate plans, today you will take your biggest step into adulthood—a status that offers great opportunity and also carries great responsibility. There are values and traits that you have been developing over the past several years that will take you far in this next stage of your life—hard work, integrity and adaptability, to mention a few. These values will never go out of style and should never be underestimated.

When I was asked to speak at your commencement, I began to wonder:

- How can I deliver a meaningful speech that will be memorable to each of you and leave you with some information and tools that will truly serve you in your journey through life?
- Well, that's a pretty tall order. But ultimately, I decided to simply speak from my heart and to share my own life story with you.
- You will find that my journey was NOT your typical academic pathway to the university presidency. In fact,... it couldn't be more the opposite.

- While I am now at a very different point in my life, I have been just where you sit. And, although it was 40-plus years ago, I remember my own high school graduation like it was yesterday.
- It was in May of 1965 and the Vietnam War was really ramping up. That world event touched my life directly and profoundly colored the experience of my entire generation.
- In the area of “high technology,” color televisions were still rarely found in homes (and there were certainly no computers, i-pads, i-phones,...or, i-anythings!),
- Motown music filled the airways in those days and the Beatles were at the peak of their worldwide popularity (and all we had to listen to were AM radio and vinyl records!).
- I sat in the audience wondering when the speaker was going to be finished, so I could get to the graduation party that we were having that night.
- I certainly wasn’t giving a lot of thought to the next step in my life, although, in retrospect, I should have, given what I did over the next several years.
- You see, although I took college preparatory courses throughout my high school years, I never thought seriously about attending a college or university. Higher education simply wasn’t a household topic or expectation in my family.
- My focus at the time was going to work at the local DuPont factory, where my father, grandfather, uncles and just about everyone else in my small New Jersey town worked. Getting that job was my top priority, so I could get what was REALLY important to me, a cool car.
- I was raised in a blue collar family with five children (I was the second child), a father who worked as an electrician, and a mom who stayed at home.
- We weren’t poor...but we certainly weren’t wealthy. My parents just managed to make ends meet.
- But home is where I learned the value of a dollar, the value of family, and the value of public service (my father was also an elected official). There I also learned the values of hard work, honor, perseverance, integrity, being organized, treating others with respect, and how to generally just be a nice person.
- So, after high school, off to the DuPont Company I went, where I worked for about a year before I joined the U.S. Army.
- I spent a year in Germany and 14 months in Vietnam.
- Once discharged from the Army, I briefly returned to my job at DuPont. Then I took on a number of jobs in construction, and eventually found myself pumping gas on the New Jersey Turnpike. Yes, I was a full time gas station attendant who, along the way, had also gotten married and had a child.
- One cold, rainy day in November, when my hands were so numb that it took both of them to pry off gas caps, I had an epiphany.....surely there was something better I could do with my life! So, at that very moment when I was 25 years old, I decided that I was somehow going to college.
- I enrolled in college, earned my Bachelors degree in Environmental Science, and later went on to earn a Master’s degree in public administration.
- During my undergraduate years, I somehow impressed the university’s president, who took an interest in me and suggested that I come to work for the institution after I graduated. My first job was working as a student activities coordinator, planning large student events.

- I have now worked in Higher Education for more than 30 years.
- I have held positions in various colleges and universities and in state and national higher education associations. I have worked in capacities such as Chief Financial Officer, Vice President and Executive VP for Administration and Finance at two institutions...and now, President of one of America's highly regarded public universities.
- Honestly, those many years ago when I graduated from high school, I never could have dreamed that one day I would be standing here, addressing such an outstanding group of students, as a University president.
- I tell my story to you today because I want to share some life lessons and describe some of the characteristics that have served me well.
- Although you may not fully appreciate it yet, each of you has been blessed with the opportunity for a quality education that can take you wherever you want to go. Further, you have been blessed with supportive parents and family members who have worked to impress upon you the importance of education. However, it is incumbent upon you to put these advantages to work, in order to make your own life both successful and meaningful.
- No matter where you start in life, you can never be certain where your journey will lead you. Whatever your goals, you, too, may achieve heights that you've never yet imagined.
- I believe that the personal characteristics and character traits you have cultivated—here at Washington and Lee and at home through the love and support of your family—will serve you well if you make them part of who you are. I believe, forgive the analogy, that if you key them into your internal GPS, they will guide you through life in a positive direction with minimal detours.

The first essential characteristic is:

- Perseverance. My view is that success often is more a test of perseverance than a result of extreme intelligence.
 - In college, I found that if I worked hard, read and completed assignments on time, participated in class and studied for tests, that I could get good grades. I know these may sound like very basic, but I can't understate how important they are.
 - You know, in college, I always felt my perseverance was being tested, because the pressure was constant. There was always a paper due or a test next week. This was good practice for the real world. You will find that you continually have to persevere, not only in college, but in your career and in your personal life. There always will be deadlines and expectations that challenge you. Learn to persevere and you will be successful.

A second important key to success is:

- Hard work. What is hard work? Digging ditches? Busting concrete with a jack hammer? Solving difficult math problems or synthesizing thoughts in a cohesive argument for a report you are writing?
 - While these may be examples of work that can be hard, they do not match my definition, which is this:
 - I believe hard work is when you make a consistent effort—demonstrating dependability and getting things done—no matter how difficult or how many obstacles have to be overcome. Hard work is a commitment to do whatever is necessary to achieve your goals.

- They say that nothing in life comes easy—and that is true—especially for the things that really matter. Pursuing your education, succeeding in your career, helping others who are less fortunate, solving important world problems, or building a successful marriage and raising a family all require hard work, and plenty of it. But that work brings great rewards and personal fulfillment.

Third, is the important character trait of:

- Integrity – I believe if you follow your natural instincts and always strive to do the right thing, integrity will be a natural part of you.
 - I don't believe there is a more important characteristic in highly successful and respected individuals than integrity. Honesty and consistency of values play a major role in defining who you are. I am pleased that I am president of a university where our students pride themselves in their Honor System—and where we, as a community of honor, seek to live up to the highest standards of honesty at all times. At UMW, we say that “honor is a way of life”. This principle guides us daily and prepares our students to lead lives of integrity.
 - Another critical component of integrity is following through on your pledge. “Always do what you say you will do.” If you follow this principle, employers, coworkers and all the people you serve will respect you and have confidence in you.

Fourth is:

- Adaptability – Sometimes, we all find ourselves in social situations where we're not at ease.
 - Have you ever walked away from people to avoid conversation?
 - The ability to be adaptable is not an innate characteristic in everyone. But to succeed in life, this is a skill you should work to develop.
 - Force yourself to interact with people you don't know or who you may even feel slightly intimidated by. Learn how to make small talk. Take time to get to know those who are different from you and show a genuine interest in them.
 - You will find that as you move through life, your ability to handle these situations will serve you well.
 - Of course, being adaptable is more than interacting with people. Whether in the workplace or visiting another country, take time to observe what is happening around you, be flexible and somewhat adventurous, and adapt your behavior to the circumstances at hand.

And last, while it might sound somewhat naïve or simplistic, a most important characteristic to cultivate is:

- Common Decency –
 - Always be nice to people, regardless of who they are. You would be surprised how a simple “hello” or “good morning” to individuals from all walks of life will reflect on you in an extremely positive manner. Taking time to smile, make eye contact, and be pleasant will enrich the lives of others and will make you feel better too. This practice will make you approachable, respected and appreciated in whatever situation you find yourself. And these characteristics are extremely important to success in today's business world.

You have gotten this far in your young lives, so you already know the feeling of success... but at some point, you will face difficulty, failure, disappointment, or tough decisions...and it's during these most trying times that your true self will surface.... And it's these times of great challenge where perseverance, hard work, integrity, adaptability, and common decency will be most needed. I can assure you (pause) that if you face those times in your life with these five characteristics ingrained in your character, you will enjoy success—even when the path ahead may look long and rocky. If you stay true to yourself, your path will, without a doubt in my mind, deliver you to a good place; one filled with success and happiness.

I would now like to close with something President Bill Clinton once said.

“If you pursue your dreams, you can't quit when you fail, you can't quit when you mess up and you can't quit when life deals you a tough hand. You have been given the tools to triumph, now it is up to your will, your mind and your heart.”

Congratulations to the class of 2012; I wish you all the best!