

St. Joe's University Commencement Address
Saturday, May 14, 2011

Remarks by Suzanne Wright

GOOD AFTERNOON! Father Lannon...members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff... parents and friends...the students of the class of 2011 – it is a great pleasure and privilege to be here to celebrate this terrific occasion with you! Thank you for this wonderful honor!

I'd like to congratulate our fellow degree recipient – Kay Stifler Nash – Kay – you were a pioneer at St. Joseph's - by joining the faculty as its first female educator you opened the door for hundreds, if not thousands of female professors and scholars, to follow in your footsteps. From woman to woman, I admire you- and I THANK you.

Many here may think of today's commencement ceremony as an ending – an occasion to mark the culmination of years of learning, hard work, competing and giving back. But as we know – to commence means to begin. Today is a day of beginnings. And while it's true that your time here at St. Joseph's has come to an end; it was simply the first major stepping stone on the long path of your adult life. Today, we celebrate all of you.

Today, we also say goodbye to one of the most accomplished leaders in St. Joseph's history – Father Lannon - who will be moving back to his native Midwest to head up his former alma mater – Creighton University. We know that Father Lannon has forever altered the landscape of St. Joseph's and we know that he will be sorely missed. We wish you well Father, in YOUR next chapter. How lucky Creighton is to have you back!

As a person who decided to embark on my college education later in life, the impact of this day is not lost on me. Graduation was a milestone in my life as I know this day is for each of you. St. Joseph's is a unique university because of what it produces– STUDENTS LIKE YOU.

What an amazing world we live in today... just think about this fact... If FACEBOOK was a country, it would be the fifth largest in the world. Today it claims over 500 MILLION users. By 2015, the social networking website is expected to surpass the United States and China in population with over 1.6 BILLION users. Each of you here today is apart of that genesis.

Many people use the service lightheartedly – which is fine – but I if you really stop and think about what you can do – and who you are capable of reaching – just imagine how much you can achieve.

We need to look no further than Wael Ghonim who recognized the possibility of rallying other disenfranchised Egyptians like him through a grassroots, online movement. His Facebook campaign ignited unprecedented social change by ending President Mubarak's 30 year autocratic grip over the Egyptian people.

Like Wael did for the people of Egypt on a large scale – you too have the necessary tools to uphold the Ignatian vision of educating 'men and women for others.' Social technology is here to stay – so let's use it wisely.

Today is your Gateway to the Future. As you begin to move forward- recognize that transformation is a good thing. It means we are growing and expanding in ways we never knew possible.

And while a fundamental aspect of change is the uncertainty that comes with it, leave here today knowing that each of you is anchored by a core set of values – Spirit. Intellect. Purpose - which will prepare you for the rest of your lives. And let me be the first to tell you that you can find your life's purpose at any age.

I found mine only seven years ago, when my grandson Christian was diagnosed with autism. At the time, 1 in 166 children were being diagnosed with the disorder. Now, only six years later, 1 in 110 children, 1 in 70 boys – approximately 1% of the US population are affected by autism. There has been a 600% increase in the last 20 years. Just this week a South Korean study announced the prevalence of autism is even more far reaching than we imagined. Their findings indicated that 1 in 38 children are affected. We don't know why this is happening and we need answers now!

When Christian was diagnosed my husband and I were told "we're sorry – there's not much we can do for your grandson." We visited some of the best doctors in the field of autism – and each time the message was the same. I didn't understand why the medical community wasn't paying close attention to the prevalence numbers – it didn't make any sense.

At that moment I realized my family had a choice; we could accept what the medical community was telling us – or we could do something to change it. We decided to stand up and fight.

In 2005 we founded our organization Autism Speaks – and now, through the incredible support of our friends, corporations, and grass roots volunteers – we have become the largest autism science and advocacy organization in the world.

AND – in 2007, the United Nations stood up to support the mission of Autism Speaks by granting us our own World Day. In the history of the U.N. only three world health days have been passed- Diabetes, AIDS, and now Autism.

Each and every member state must vote yes to secure a resolution for a World Day – which is why this is such a significant victory for the autism community.

Now, each April 2, we celebrate World Autism Awareness Day.

A few weeks ago, the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon led a panel discussion at the U.N. where he remarked that “autism is a matter of international concern that demands our collective attention...” and that autism awareness is a “global movement” which aims “to create a better world for all of us.”

Some of you may have noticed that Barbelin Hall was lit blue on the eve of World Autism Awareness Day, April 1 – that’s because St. Joseph’s took part in our international Light It Up Blue campaign. We created the project last year to shine a global spotlight on autism during Autism Awareness Month in April and on World Autism Awareness Day. This year we received extraordinary support as more than 1800 structures in over 180 cities in 35 countries on six continents lit up blue for autism – most notably - Christ the Redeemer Statue in Brazil, the Sydney Opera House in Australia, and the Empire State Building. I hope wherever you are next year, you will consider joining us in this campaign – we want to light the whole world blue!

While my grandson’s diagnosis was a devastating blow for our family, I can also see that it was a silent call to action. Every day we work to bring hope and real life changes to millions of families.

You are the next generation of parents, so PLEASE be sure to know the signs of autism and help us in our fight against this heartbreaking disorder. In sharing this story of our continuing battle against autism I hope that you take from it just how much creating social action and championing for the public good are important legacies of a St. Joseph’s education - perhaps its most significant ones.

I hope each of you finds your mission... and remember, it’s never too late to discover your life’s work....

My passion and dedication to what I do started with a little boy named Christian. But an unflagging pursuit for what YOU want to do can come from anywhere – the important thing is that YOU DO IT!

I hope the passions in your life, both personal and professional, are ignited. And that you use these passions as well as the talents, skills and knowledge you have acquired during your time at St. Joseph’s, to help make our world a better place... The famous poet William Butler Yeats once said, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” May your own fires be continually lit ... and may you have the courage and wisdom and enthusiasm to be that special person, whose fire lights the way for others.

Thank you very much for inviting me to be part of this special time... many, many congratulations to all of you. And now my husband Bob...

Remarks by Bob Wright:

Good afternoon... It's a pleasure for me to be here today to receive this significant honor on this, the 160th Commencement of St. Joseph's University. Thank You.

I'd also like to congratulate our fellow degree recipient Kay Stifler Nash – you truly are an inspiration.

First, let me say how proud I am of all of you. You have earned a great gift...The gift of a St. Joseph's education. It's an education that opened up your minds and your hearts ... it's an education that – in the best spirit of a Catholic faith and Jesuit tradition showed you what it means to live the examined life ... and a life of service.

Each of you is better prepared ... more motivated ... and willing to take from this college all the riches that it can give you. You've worked hard, maybe even played hard – and now you've reached your goal.

You've achieved your dream: You get to put on a long black dress and have Father Lannon give you a rolled-up piece of paper.

But that's not really what it is about, is it? The fact is, all that hard work has prepared you not just for today ... but for tomorrow and all the days after. And I see you heading into a very bright future, but it will require some personal sacrifice.

For example, you'll have to say goodbye to your beloved cheese steaks from Larry's and step down from your favorite seats in Hagan Arena. Seriously you are carrying out the St. Joseph's Jesuit mission... and working toward this very moment.

As a St. Joseph's Alumnus, you are the forces that will keep the Hawk soaring. I know that you'll return to support this great St. Joseph's basketball team and I know it's just a matter of time before the Hawks go on to WIN the NCAA Championship!

And speaking of winning, I have to congratulate the ladies of St. Joseph's who participated in lacrosse, rowing, soccer, tennis, indoor and outdoor track – all of which earned Public Recognition Awards from NCAA for their Academic achievement.

Many congrats to the Hawks men and women rowing teams which combined, won the Bratton Trophy for total points earned - Not an easy task. St. Joseph's inspires the winning spirit in all of its students who carry out the Ignatian vision – and who are dedicated to leaving this world a better place from where they found it.

As you begin the next phase of your life, do not get discouraged if your long-term plans seem delayed or sidetracked. The beauty of being in your twenties is that you have a little room to negotiate your future. For instance, the last thing I expected was to be sent by the Army to Fort Polk, Louisiana– the home of the combat infantry man for Vietnam. But it happened. I was fresh out of law school with a wife and a new baby at home.

Henry Ford once said “Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal.”

While it's true I was diverted, I never lost sight of where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do. And when I was released from the Army I got back on track.

This may sound trite - but let me tell you this: Ambition can be a good thing when it's coupled with a strong resolve to serve humanity. Otherwise, ambition by itself is a hollow pursuit.

So – as the next generation of future leaders the burden is on you. Many of you will be tested ... Pride, greed, and envy are dangerous traps. But you have what it takes to stand firm.

I've spent almost my whole working life as a businessperson. A lot of you will do the same. My legal experience was in litigation, labor law, environmental law, corporate, real estate, arbitration, criminal defense, and divorce ... and that is a good background for the entertainment business!

I spent 21 years as CEO of NBC and NBC Universal – and yes, I got to watch a lot of TV. However most of my time there was spent on people development, mentoring, hiring, firing, and setting and meeting operation targets and developing our business strategies.

I have covered a lot of ground, both figuratively and literally speaking. With General Electric, I traveled all over the world and met with world leaders and influencers. I loved what I did and was happy to have my family's support.

Suzanne and I have three fantastic children, 5 ½ amazing grandchildren and one inquisitive grand-dog - Izzy. We have shared some of the happiest moments of my life together....But as with any family there were times when things went wrong.

When you welcome your first grandchild into the world, the last thing you expect to learn is that you may never have a conversation with him. Autism not only affects the person, but the family surrounding the person. And the strain it causes can be debilitating.

In the months after Christian's diagnosis I reflected a lot on my Jesuit education, and the morals it instilled in me. Much like St. Joseph's - who last year saw 6% of its graduating class go on to serve in the Human/Community Services and Non-profit realm - my college, Holy Cross, also taught me the importance of service. It was an easy decision to create Autism Speaks, so that we could help our grandson – and the millions of children around the world like him.

Since we founded our organization in 2005, we have already delivered \$160 million to scientific research and to developing new resources for our families. We have 231 full-time employees working to raise awareness and funds through fundraisers, corporate incentives, and grassroots initiatives like our 80 Walks across North America.

In the past few years I have focused most of my time, as has Suzanne, in finding the answers to this incomprehensible disorder. The fact of the matter remains – autism knows no geographic borders, no race, or religion. And each year, it becomes more and more prevalent.

As Suzanne mentioned, new numbers in Korea now point to 1 in 38 children affected. This mission, to solving the mysteries of autism, has become one of the most important endeavors of my life.

The importance for autism education, awareness and research is being felt everywhere – even right here at St. Joseph's. As many of you know, in October of 2010 St. Joseph's opened the Kinney Center for Autism Education and Support.

The Center and the people running it are dedicated to improving quality of life for people who are on the autism spectrum.

I have to salute St. Joseph's for being one of the first Universities to create this kind of resource Center for the autism community, and I have to thank alumnus Paul and Margaret Hondros, for making the Center a reality. Also – many thanks to Senator Casey who's here today - for being a staunch supporter of crucial autism legislation in Pennsylvania.

TODAY and RIGHT NOW – whether you know it or not – your classmates, your mentors, your future employers, your family and friends: Autism is a part of our community and is connected to all of us and all of them in some way. WE are that community and WE speak for those who struggle to speak for themselves.

YOU are the next generation of thinkers, activists, technologists, entrepreneurs, and educators and of course, PARENTS.

So please be sure to learn and know the signs of autism and help us in our fight to understand and change the course of this heartbreaking disorder.

While autism has become my crusade, my wish for each of you is that you find your own causes to crusade for... You have learned this ... and, hopefully, will live this. This is the true value of your St. Joseph's experience.

Throughout your lifetime you will celebrate many achievements, like this one today. But getting to that place of celebration may not always be easy. As you travel down this next path, keep in mind the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson – “Our greatest glory is NOT in never failing – but in rising up every time we fail.”

Good luck and congratulations to you all. Enjoy this day ... thank your family and friends ... and may all your crusades be a success! Oh, and one more thing... THE HAWK WILL NEVER DIE!!! Thank you very much.