

Laura Welch Bush Commencement Address
May 16, 2009

Thank you, Dr. Turner, for your kind introduction. Thank you for inviting me – I'm happy to join each of you for this special day.

Thank you to the distinguished faculty, members of the Board of Trustees, alumni, parents, and families for your very warm welcome.

Most of all, thank you and congratulations to the SMU Class of 2009.

Today we celebrate nearly 2,000 graduates from 7 schools and 173 majors – representing all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and 102 foreign countries. We congratulate your parents and families and teachers, whose love and support brought you to this day.

All of SMU's schools are well represented today. Many of you are from the Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences. Others are from the Cox School of Business...the Meadows School of the Arts...the Perkins School of Theology... and the Dedman School of Law....

There are students here from the Lyle School of Engineering. Your teachers tell me this may be the first time you've seen daylight since September 2005.

And of course, I'm especially happy to see everyone from the new Annette Simmons School of Education.

As an SMU alumna, I know the Class of 2009 has received a fine education. For nearly 100 years SMU's diverse programs and distinguished faculty have challenged students to reach their highest potential and make a difference in their community and the world.

SMU's proud history and ongoing tradition of excellence are two reasons why George and I are so glad SMU is home to the George W. Bush Presidential Center. We look forward to the partnerships that will develop between the Bush Institute and many of SMU's schools. I'm especially looking forward to continuing my work on education and literacy by partnering with the Annette Simmons School of Education.

Today, I've been asked to share with you some parting wisdom. As I reflected on what to say to you, I remembered my own graduation from SMU in 1968. It was the height of the civil rights movement. Young people were questioning the values of their elders and the United States was struggling against the spread of communism. Today, the Cold War is long over, we have elected an African-American as President of the United States, and there are more democracies in the world than ever before.

Though you cannot know what the coming years will bring, I assure you they will bring progress and change – and that you will be part of it – just as my class of 1968 was part of what has occurred over the last forty-one years.

The commencement speaker at my graduation, Dr. Willis Tate, President of SMU, probably called us to greatness, but I don't remember much of what he said. I just remember how I felt: Relieved that finals were over... Excited to embark on the next adventure... and most of all – impatient for him to finish.

So then I reflected on when I received my Master's degree. I could not recall who gave that commencement address. That's because I skipped the ceremony. But I did look it up, and you can imagine my surprise when I discovered it was some guy named George Bush. Four years after that speech, I married his son.

In forty years you may not remember who spoke at your graduation, but I know you'll have many memories of your time at SMU.

Class of 2009, your four years of college, or for some of you maybe five, are short in the scope of your whole lifetime, but the lessons you learned will be influential for the rest of your life.

Many of those lessons you learned in the classroom – beginning with "Rhetoric," or "Perspectives," ... or during those "class meetings" at the Barley House.

Some lessons you learned on the football field – like when you beat TCU... or in the swimming pool, as the Mustangs have dominated Conference USA for four years in a row.

Other lessons you learned from the people you met here and the friendships you built. Some of the first people you met during "Mustang Corral" are now your best friends. And they'll be your best friends long after you leave. The friends I made at SMU have been my friends for my whole life. Just last Sunday I was in New York City eating dinner with one of my roommates, remembering our college graduation and talking about where life has taken us since then.

When I graduated from SMU, I never would have expected to be giving the SMU commencement address or to be on the Board of Trustees. And frankly, some of the Board members who were my classmates, I wouldn't have expected to see on the Board either!

The bonds formed at SMU are strong... and no matter how many years you've been away, I hope that you'll find, like I have, that coming back to SMU feels like coming home. That's why I'm so happy George and I will spend the rest of our lives working here on the SMU campus at the Bush Library and Institute as a part of the SMU community.

I remember many of my favorite professors, including my favorite literature professor, Dr. Harryette Ehrhardt, who's still a friend of mine. Her children's literature class inspired me to become a librarian. The books I read in her class I later read to children in my own classrooms, and to children in the classrooms I've visited across our country and around the world.

From establishing the Texas Book Festival and the National Book Festival to serving as the Honorary Ambassador for the United Nations Literacy Decade – I can trace much of my life's work to my experiences here at SMU.

As much as any generation of Americans, the Class of 2009 is tasked with resolving challenges that lie far beyond your doorstep – even far beyond America's borders. Between cell phones and the Internet, you have a world of information literally at your fingertips. And because our world is so small, you can't ignore the genocide in Darfur, or the recent brutal treatment of democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma. You know the plight of children orphaned by AIDS in Africa.

Today begins a period of incredible liberty and adventure, a time to find your calling and to demand the most from life before life makes specific demands on you. And as you face this new chapter of life, I can

tell you one thing for certain: You won't waste your talents and education if you use them in service to others.

A very wise man – my father-in-law, President Bush – said, "Any definition of a successful life must include service to others."

That principle has governed not only his life, but his children's and grandchildren's lives as well. In his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush asked every American to dedicate two years – or 4,000 hours – over the rest of their lives to help their neighbors in need.

In your very first days at SMU the Class of 2009 answered that call in a mighty way. Weeks into your first semester you opened your doors to more than 150 displaced students from Tulane, Loyola, Xavier, Southern and Dillard universities. As students arrived from the Gulf Coast with only the clothes on their backs, SMU launched "Three Weeks of Relief" – quickly raising dollars and gathering supplies for Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

Much of the money raised came from you. Across campus, you filled donation jars with change, you bought t-shirts, and you collected supplies at sporting events.

You turned your Homecoming football game – SMU vs. Tulane – into a celebration of New Orleans. Overnight, Bishop Boulevard became The French Quarter – complete with beads, jazz, and Cajun food. And even though the Mustangs fell to the Green Wave, you tasted success at halftime as a check for \$50,000 was presented to Conference USA to benefit the American Red Cross' Katrina relief efforts.

You began your days at SMU reaching out to help those affected by Hurricane Katrina – four years later you know that service and civic involvement are central to the lessons you've learned at SMU. Hundreds of you have participated in Alternative Spring Break projects. Just this spring, you built homes in Laredo, Texas and Taos, New Mexico with Habitat for Humanity. You restored wildlife habitats in Moab, Utah, you volunteered in rural Tennessee, and prepared meals for the needy in New York City and St. Louis.

Your compassion extends well beyond America's borders as well. More than 30% of you have studied abroad. Many more have traveled overseas on service trips – applying your education to help those in need.

As you leave SMU, there are so many needs to be met, and so many ways you can help. You may choose to work in the healthcare field. You may choose to serve in uniform in the military – or out of uniform with the Peace Corps. Or you may choose to run for public office and serve your state or local community. Many of you are already pursuing careers in public service, including 18 of your classmates who will serve in schools through Teach for America.

Whatever you choose to do, don't be afraid to take risks or change course. When George and I started out in Midland, we were ready for a nice, quiet, normal life. Five years later we had twins. Ten years later we were living in Washington, DC helping George's father get elected President. Fifteen years later we were in Dallas where George was running the Texas Rangers baseball team. Twenty years later we were in Austin when George was governor. Twenty five years later we were in the White House, in a nation changed by the attacks of September 11th. Thirty years later we were finishing a second term – "sprinting to the finish." For year number thirty five, we plan to be here in Dallas ... but you never know.

It wasn't the life we expected, but the twists and turns along the way gave it meaning and richness and value.

I know the same will be true for you.

Congratulations to each one of you. Thank you for giving me this chance to share this special day with you. May God bless the Class of 2009.