

Ron Kirk Commencement Address
May 15, 2010

“President Turner, honored graduates, proud parents, friends and my fellow Mustang Alumni ...

“It is a privilege and an honor for me to return to Dallas and join you this morning for today’s commencement ceremony to honor the 2010 graduating class of Southern Methodist University. And of course being the college football fan that I am, I must acknowledge the fact that SMU football is back on the Hilltop. I don’t know about you, but I was so proud to watch SMU’s football team beat Hawaii in the Sheraton Hawaii Bowl on Christmas Eve last year. You should be very proud of what your football team has accomplished. It’s been a long time coming and very well deserved.

“I want to extend my best wishes to all of the parents here today. And I specifically want to encourage you graduates to express your love and affection to your parents many times today – and to all the family members who have loved you, financially supported you as private school tuition is not cheap, provided you home-cooked meals, and sacrificed so you could enjoy your days here at SMU.

“I can honestly say that I never thought when graduated from Austin College and decided to go to law school that I would one day end up serving as Secretary of State under Texas Governor Ann Richards, become mayor of Dallas, or ultimately serve in a Presidential Cabinet as United States Trade Representative.

“President Obama has asked me, as the nation’s top trade negotiator, to engage the world on behalf of the United States. It’s my job to engage with America’s trading partners and to convince them to open their markets to our goods and services so that we can have better-paying jobs here at home. At the same time, I have to connect with American families here at home to convince them that we can make trade, and our government as a whole, work better for them.

“Here’s one non-trade example of how the Obama Administration is doing that. Last month, we got some good news about how graduating college students can keep their health insurance.

“As you all know, in March, President Obama signed historic legislation to give all Americans access to affordable health care. One of the key pieces of this law was a new reform that allowed young adults to stay on their parents’ insurance until age 26.

“Going without insurance is dangerous for your health and your finances at this age, since if disaster does strike, most of you don’t have any savings to fall back on.

“So our goal was for no young American to needlessly go without health care this summer. And I’m pleased to report that as of today, at least 65 insurers, including all of America’s biggest insurance companies, have agreed to start covering you immediately, instead of waiting for the law to take effect this September.

“Hopefully, this will give many of you peace of mind and freedom to leave SMU with a firm intention to engage the world – intellectually, culturally, morally, and spiritually. I want to talk to you today about some ways you can do that.

LESSON 1: READ OUTSIDE THE LINES

“I am sure most of you are tired of books and papers right now, and I understand if you want to take a few weeks off from reading anything more complicated than the back of your cereal box. But for the rest of your life, you need to read – for education, for inspiration, for stimulation, or relaxation. And in today’s world, you need to be more proactive, more deliberate about your reading than ever.

“Through the miracles of technology, there’s more reading material and information available to you than to any generation before. The challenge now is to make sure that reading expands your world – instead of just reinforcing what you already believe.

“In Washington, you can tell people’s politics by the papers they read and by the news channels they watch. But it shouldn’t be so. Our political discourse would be far richer if people took five minutes to see what the other guys are saying, where they’re coming from, and why.

“Your life will be richer for the same exercise. Limiting your reading material and your news to only that which immediately interests you or that which supports what you believe, is dangerous and diminishing. So accept the challenge of reading and exposing yourself to all kinds of information. Read voraciously. Read for life. Read outside the lines.

LESSON 2: GET YOUR VOTER REGISTRATION CARD AND YOUR PASSPORT

“Most of you probably feel that your SMU diploma is the most important piece of paper you’ll get this year, but I want to encourage you to think about two more documents today: your voter registration card, and a passport.

“When it comes to politics, most people either love it or hate it. But regardless of how you feel, you have to vote to be a fully contributing member of society.

“Some of you may run for office. But all of you can be part of governing by casting your ballots in every election. It doesn’t speak well of us when new democracies have voter turnouts of 80 percent or more and so many eligible voters in one of the world’s oldest democracies sit at home. So if you don’t already have your voter registration card, get one when you leave here and vote in the next election on the calendar.

“While you’re filling out forms –get your passport, too. No matter what kind of career you pursue after you leave SMU, you are more likely than any generation before you to traverse the world and engage in global commerce.

“I traveled on trade missions as Mayor of Dallas, and have been all around the world as USTR. Whenever I travel, I return home with new insight that informs U.S. policy. And if you strike out to see the world, you’ll bring back insights that will inform your world view – make you a better, more thoughtful citizen of this country and of the planet.

“And let me tell you, graduates – to engage the world effectively, you must also be multilingual. You know this is true even if you don’t leave home – right here in Texas, it pays to speak more than one language. So if you didn’t get your language learning as part of this degree, you’d better sign up for summer school or find another way to learn. If you speak several languages you are considered to be multilingual ... if you speak two languages you are considered bi-lingual ... if you only speak one language you are presumed to be an American.

LESSON 3: DON’T LOSE THE ART OF WRITING

“In this age of e-mails and texts and tweets, writing is in danger of becoming a lost art. When is the last time that you wrote a letter to someone? With a pen?”

“With some kids today, full sentences and unabbreviated words are an exception rather than the rule. But even as technology connects us all like never before, just remember that “u... r... awesome... l-o-l” sent to a cell phone will never mean as much to your parents, your best friend, or the person that you will marry, as the words, “Thank you” or “I miss you,” or “I love you,” will mean on a piece of paper or in a card. A person may buy a new cell phone, but he or she will keep your handwritten words in that letter or card forever.

“And you can make a similar impact with handwritten notes in the business world, too. Nothing will ever show your attention to detail like taking the time to write a note to a client or counterpart, and honoring them by writing well.

LESSON 4: APPRECIATE THE POWER OF YOUR OWN GENIUS

“Just in case you think that making a mark on the world is meant for bigger, stronger, or more important people – here’s a last lesson. Never underestimate your power to bring about change.

“In my life, I have witnessed to some of the most remarkable social and political changes in the last century, and not just in our country, but all around the world. When I graduated from law school, the Soviet Union was still one of the most powerful and repressive forces on the Earth. Apartheid was the rule of law in South Africa, and many people around the world lived under governments that dictated their freedoms, their employment, their dreams and their aspirations.

“All of those circumstances have been changed radically since then, because of the faith, inspiration and power of people who engaged, and agitated for change.

They weren’t always the richest people, or the most powerful people, or sometimes even the smartest people in the room. But they saw a chance to make a difference, and they acted. Why shouldn’t that be you?”

“When I was growing up in Texas, I went to a small church and every Sunday we would recite John 3:16 – which begins, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.” Our pastor had another way of putting it: for God so loved the world, that he didn’t send a committee. He sent one powerful individual who would carry out that mission. And he’s sent others, from Mahatma Gandhi to Lech Walesa to Mother Teresa to Dorothy Height to Martin Luther King, Jr.

“So – what have you been sent to do?”

“Go work hard at your career, whatever it may be. Raise the best family that you can, with smart, educated kids. Improve your community, whether those are the neighbors on your street, the people in your town, or the citizens of the world.

“An American author named Marianne Williamson made the case for “you” far more eloquently than I ever could. Nelson Mandela is a pretty eloquent speaker, but even he chose these words from Ms. Williamson for his inaugural address as President of South Africa. So let me leave you with this:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be

brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.'

“So don't play small. One way or the other, commit to making a positive impact on people's lives by opening your eyes, your ears, your minds, your hearts, and your hands to the world.

“You've made Southern Methodist University proud today. Continue to make SMU proud in the future. Thank you and God bless you.”

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