

KATERYNA YUSHCHENKO

SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

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*Kateryna Yushchenko
former First Lady of the Ukraine*

Graduates, Board of Trustees, President Wyatt, Faculty, Staff, family and guests. It is such an honor for me to receive an honorary degree from Southern Utah University and to be with you here on your important day.

When President Wyatt invited Victor and me to address your graduating class, I thought: what relevant lessons can we, two people from Ukraine, bring to you, young people in Utah, just starting your life's path? Ukraine is very far away, and it's possible -- though I hope not -- that some of you could not even find it on a map....

We are grateful to President Wyatt and to your university for understanding that the world is a small place, that what happens on the other side of the globe affects your lives, and that you will be safer, more prosperous and fulfilled if you understand the broad world around you.

I guess I am the bridge –

I grew up in America, born to Ukrainian parents who immigrated here to establish a new life after the horrors of Soviet repression and famine, and after being forced to work as slave laborers by the Nazis in WWII Germany.

I was named after my father's two younger sisters, both of whom died as children in the Holodomor, the artificial famine that killed up to 10 million Ukrainians in 1932-33.

I graduated from Georgetown and the University of Chicago, worked at the White House, State Department and Congress, and then in 1991, I moved to the country of my parents and ancestors – Ukraine.

My husband, a son of schoolteachers and farmers, grew up in a small village in eastern Ukraine, then an integral part of a closed Soviet Union, became an accountant and banker, and did not visit the US until the USSR collapsed and Ukraine became independent.

But when he and I met, we quickly discovered that, though we grew up thousands of miles away in very different systems, indeed in different worlds, our values were very similar.

These values may sound trite to some people, maybe they would have sounded trite to me when I was 20, but now, in my middle-age, I understand that they are fundamental: we shared the same understanding of God, country, family and individual responsibility, and a feeling that we had to give back to the country of our ancestors and to the societies in which we lived.

Today, when I think of how we need to raise our 5 children and 4 grandchildren, I return to those values again and again.

We teach our children:

First and foremost: make God, church, faith – and thus love, compassion, patience and sharing -- the center of your life. God is the foundation, God is the anchor, God is the hope and God is the inspiration.

I remember a moment during the Orange Revolution. It was one of the most difficult times of my life: my husband had been poisoned, millions of Ukrainians had gone to the streets to demand freedom and to protest against election fraud, and my family was being threatened every day. Many feared something like Tiananmen Square – that the government would bring a bloody end to our peaceful uprising, and that my family might be killed or arrested.

Then one day, an amazing thing happened --all the leaders of all our churches and faiths – Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim – came onto the wintery cold, snowy stage and prayed together.

That stunning moment of faith and hope gave all of us the courage to carry on. The leaders of our churches and faiths were with us in our Revolution of Dignity in 2013 as well, and continue to provide hope and consolation to us now, when we have been invaded by Russian forces and are suffering the largest war and displacement of people in Europe since WWII.

Second: honor and defend your country – it is not only your home and your fortress. It is your homeland, with a glorious and hard-fought history, with colorful, unique customs, traditions and folklore. Like God and family, it made you who you are. And it is not only your past, it is the provider of your future opportunities, the place where you can realize your dreams. And for all it provides to you, it deserves your loyalty, your commitment, your participation and your love.

Third: love, work for and protect your family – your past generation that created your world, your current generation that surrounds and makes your world, and the next generation – who will be the true followers of all that is the best of your past and present. I come from a country where family was always important, and I know well that today I am in a special and unique place that truly cherishes and respects family.

Fourth: work hard. Whatever you choose to do, love it while you are doing it, put your all into it. If you don't love it, start along another path – today's society gives you that amazing luxury, to make various, fascinating, challenging choices over the course of your lifetimes.

My husband worked in banking, politics and is now building a museum..... I have worked in government, business, education and the non-profit sector – and right now I'm mulling over what the next step in my career path will be.....

The opportunities that our bold new economy offers your generation are mind-boggling. But remember when you make your choices, that you have obligations to your family, and that these obligations are not a burden but a beautifully necessary challenge.

And last, remember the saying, “You make a living by what you get, you make a life by what you give.” Understand also that you have a duty to give back to your neighbors, your community, your society, and indeed, to the complicated world that is growing increasingly smaller around you.

It is trendy to talk about being “socially responsible” and, in fact, I teach a university course in Social Responsibility, but this basically means returning to our core understanding of humanity, moral values and faith. As someone once said, “The service we render others is the rent we pay for our place here on earth.”

The concepts I talked about today sound simple, but as someone who has lived the very highs and lows that life can bring, I can honestly tell you -- nothing else matters if you worship God, respect your country, love your family, work hard at whatever you attempt in life, and care for your neighbor – in the end, you will be happy, people will say -- it was a life well-lived.