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SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

May 4, 2018



President Wyatt, Commissioner Buhler, members of the Utah State Board of Regents and Southern Utah University Board of Trustees, local elected officials, faculty, staff, honored guests; ---I am honored by this privilege.

To you wonderful graduates and to the families who rejoice with you today—my warmest greetings and congratulations!

As I begin this morning there is a small matter of business...I want to answer

the question, “Why in the world is this nice lady our commencement speaker?”

There is a story to tell.

Most of you have had ample time to discover that President Scott Wyatt is a fun-loving leader. He’s young and savvy, clues in to things like memes and twitter feeds. When he realized that graduation day would fall on May the 4th, he thought immediately, “May the fourth be with you!” Star Wars Day! His next thought was, “What could be more fun than to have Mark Hamill address the graduates?” The idea grew until it was so compelling it couldn’t be restrained. The Trustees were captivated, imagining Luke Skywalker here at SUU. So President Wyatt made a diligent effort to entice Mr. Hamill to come.

Unfortunately, after careful consideration, thereby wasting much time, Mr. Hamill politely declined.

Undaunted! President Wyatt tried James Earl Jones. Imagine how wonderful it would have been to have Darth Vader. But, sadly, he also sent regrets.

So he searched for any significant connection to May 4.-- While I have no connection to Star Wars, I was born on May 4th, so today happens to be my 86th birthday, and I'm his friend and was much less likely to turn him down. Thus, the invitation was graciously made and gratefully accepted.

I have no problem being the third choice behind such an auspicious duo. You should be grateful I accepted. His 4th choice was Chewbacca.

So let me say I'm a little startled, but very sincerely honored to be with you today.

This May 4th is also very near to the 68th anniversary of receiving my associate degree from this school. Close to 70 years since I arrived on this campus. It was a quantum leap for me. I'd never been to Cedar City before. The school, BAC at that time, had almost the same number of students as the population of my town.

It was a magical world to me! I loved everything about it. I found two jobs, one as cashier at the cafeteria and another working in the bookstore. Those jobs positioned me perfectly to get to know most of my 400-plus fellow students.

My world was broadening.

I wasn't sure what I wanted to study. I thought I might become a writer, or becoming an actress would be nice, or maybe an opera singer. I was introduced to William Shakespeare and played the role of Ophelia in Hamlet. I sang the part of Lola in Cavaleria Rusticana---and decided against opera.

I had good grades except a D in shorthand and a C in softball.

That gives you a fairly clear picture of me when I had experienced only seventeen May the fourths.

Life has been wonderful since those days. It's been filled with experiences, both joyous and painful, that have woven a life tapestry that is uniquely mine.

It is deeply meaningful to me that my life's journey into adulthood began right here on this campus---where I began to know what it meant to be deepened and broadened in my perspective and capabilities—which, I might add is the goal of a university.

Those who labor here, have sought to do more than just send you forth equipped with skills that translate into income and security. They seek to invite and sometimes push you into breaking old paradigms, limited in focus and scope, and replacing them with newer and more lofty dreams and possibilities.

I think of the lofty dreams of the intrepid men and women who strove and sacrificed to bring this school into being in 1897. Their lofty dreams and the unsurpassed effort they made to bring them to reality, were the genesis of our possibilities.

One of the greatest joys of my life was to compile the history of this institution for its centennial celebration in 1997. In that process, I pored through hundreds of photographs. One of my favorite pictures shows four of the first faculty members. They're on one of their many recruiting trips seated on the ground in the shade of their buggy, eating a lunch.

They traveled by horse and buggy, to every town in the region, gathering the townspeople together to extol the virtues of education, with the hope that they would send their children to school in Cedar City.

Over and over I see parallels of pattern between those founding folks and the University of today.

I learned of one such parallel from a sweet visit with Siweela Weele, one of your fellow graduates who came to SUU from the island of Samoa. She told me that the only reason she chose SUU, was because she was so amazed that the President of the University and two faculty members actually came to her island to invite students here. I

loved the parallel with those heroes from BNS in their horse drawn buggies. It probably took them longer to get to Orderville, than it took President Wyatt to fly to Samoa. But the point is, both gave the same attention to find students who could benefit.

Siweela is determined to get a Masters of Accountancy and a CPA so when she returns to Samoa she can help provide for others the same opportunity she received.

Two others who are graduating with this class, Ryan Conti and Crystal Martinez , have both been deeply involved in a program called ACES. It stands for ASSISTANCE COACH FOR EXCELLENCE AND SUCCESS. Each of them, while working toward their own graduation, has spent hundreds of hours, mentoring, befriending and helping first-year students to find success.

Ryan came to SUU feeling alone and tentative, fearful that he might not find friends and acceptance. By nature, he is outgoing, genial, and warm but he grew up knowing about rejection, so he came with significant uncertainty. He remembers with tenderness the relief he felt his first registration day when someone simply smiled at him. That led him to ponder the importance of reaching out to others, and he was committed. He received a Thunderbird award and will receive his degree to the applause of literally hundreds of friends

Crystal graduates today, the first member in her family to gain a university degree. When she arrived at SUU, Crystal's natural tendency was to find a quiet corner and stay in it. She emerged from her quiet corner and began to serve. She, like Ryan became an ACE. When she greets a nervous new student, she says, "I'm your first friend." Imagine the relief and joy Crystal has brought to hundreds of incoming Freshmen during her time here. Her service takes a lot of time. Sometimes she serves at the expense of her own studies. But, she says, "It's the Tavi way, putting other people before yourself." Then she said, "I don't want anyone I could have helped to pass by me without my help."

People who pitch in to help other people, even when there's significant personal cost is an integral part of the tradition of this school. Ryan and Crystal and many others like them, demonstrate that this tradition carries on...quietly, resolutely, blessing lives.

I want to tell you about my new friend Elijah Holt. His story is about disappointment and adversity. It's valuable, because all of us will face hard things again and again. There's a lesson in how we respond to the tough stuff that afflicts every life.

Elijah came to SUU to play football. He'd been a successful athlete at his Jr College in California. He came with confidence, and, he says, a sense of entitlement. He intended to play.

But alas, he learned that his grades weren't good enough. He had to "red shirt." That was a kick in the teeth for Elijah and it didn't help his attitude. He did what he was told, but he gave his bare minimum. Spring wasn't much better. Then by Fall he had begun to think things over and modify his stance. By the first game of the season, a matchup with the touted Oregon Ducks, to be played on a national stage, he had won a starting slot. He was happy and excited.

That's when the adverse, unthinkable happened.

He was running back a kick. His teammate, intending to block for him, fell, right on Elijah's leg. A compound fracture, bones through the skin. A devastating injury. Just like that, the season's over for Elijah.

Almost worse than the pain, he told me, was the regret. He couldn't escape knowing he hadn't given his best. He wondered if he had made his best effort to strengthen, it might not have been so bad.

He knew he didn't want to feel that kind of regret again. So, with crutches and a boot, he got himself to the weight room. He worked as hard as he possibly could, knowing there was no possibility for him to play. He thought he might be of some value to the team, to show other players that injuries weren't the end. He could be an example of whole-hearted effort. He had time to reflect.

Elijah told me, quietly, he feels this hard thing was necessary for him to become the person God wants him to be.

I suppose the old Elijah wouldn't have told these things to a woman he'd never met before. But I met the new Elijah. The gentle, humble Elijah, filled with gratitude and concern for other people.

He told me how hard his father has always worked to support his family, and how grateful he is to him and how he loves him. He told me of his mother's unfailing support, and how he loves her. He told me how he loves his younger siblings and wants to be a good example to them.

He's grateful that this time he has no regrets. He knows he's given all he possibly can. He's not absolutely sure that he'll ever be the athlete he was before...and he'd rather not have gone through it, but he has gained some maturity that he needed, and a refinement of soul that will stay with him for the rest of his life. I saw the sincerity of the gratitude in his eyes. I thought to myself, Oh yes. God will make more than a good football player out of this man.

We can draw a parallel with the people of Cedar City who found ways to manage every crisis that threatened their dreams. The cost was almost always painful and exacting.

Each one of you graduating today will have your own evolution story. Each one of you will leave here, changed. You will have gained in this place, so wondrous to me 70 years ago, knowledge and a depth of understanding and capacities to bless the world for good. You will have gained a greater light.

Alexander Papaderos was a child during World War II. His village was destroyed by the Nazi's and he was interred with his family in a concentration camp. He grew up to be a teacher and philosopher, dedicated to struggle for peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and the illumination of darkness in human life.

At the end of a three-day seminar in which he taught these values, he asked, “Are there any questions?” After the usual awkward silence, a person asked, “What is the meaning of life?” There was uneasy laughter and people started to go. Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and said, “I will answer your question.”

Then taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into it and brought out a very small, round mirror, about the size of a quarter. Then he said, ‘When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found several broken pieces of a mirror from a wrecked German motorcycle. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would not shine – in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find. I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light – truth, understanding, knowledge – is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

‘I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world – into the black places in the hearts of men – and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.’

And so to you who will go out from SUU today, I hope this has been a wondrous place to you. I hope you are filled with joy and determination as you begin this next exciting phase of your journey.

I hope you feel confident and grateful for having received a goodly measure of knowledge, understanding, and truth, which is light.

Go now, reflect your light into the dark spaces in our world.

Darkness will always yield to light.

Let your countenance shine upon the people you meet with empathy and respect and generosity of heart. Go determined to serve and strengthen.

God can make of you a mighty force for good.

And in deference to President Wyatt...May the fourth be with you.