

Graduates, Esteemed Faculty and Staff, Family and Friends,

I am honored and humbled to be standing before you today representing the Southern Utah University class of 2025. I commend all of my classmates and fellow graduates on this momentous accomplishment. Graduating from college is certainly nothing to sneeze at, and I am so privileged to be sharing this day with all very remarkable people. I know that moment in this room right now is something each of you worked hard to earn. It is my hope that we all remember how we applied ourselves in college so that we may go beyond as we enter this next chapter of our lives.

I've learned a lot in college—both in mastering my craft and discovering who I am, as I'm sure the rest of you have. Some of us may be on the same path we started on when we first walked under that Bell Tower. Others may have had a shift in vision and will pass under the Bell Tower once again with a new goal in mind. I know I can say with confidence that my aspirations—and my life—have been changed for the better because of SUU and the lessons I learned here. I've also been changed for good by the people I have had the great blessing of calling

friends, peers, and colleagues. I'm sure that all of you also have a network that you have met during your time on this campus who have affected your life in many ways; after all, it is my belief that we learn something new from every person we meet.

As I've gone through college, I discovered a great admiration for the people I surrounded myself with. It is so easy to find the qualities we revere within the people we care about, but why can it be so challenging to pinpoint the characteristics about ourselves that set us apart?

I fear it would be in poor taste to the last four years I spent as a Musical Theater major if I didn't quote the eternally wise words of Meryl Streep. The three-time Oscar winner said "Put blinders on to those things that conspire to hold you back, especially the ones in your own head."

More often than not, our insecurities are formulated in the deepest corners of our own minds, and are some of the most ill-informed things we tell ourselves. There's a saying in the theater world that you are your own biggest critic and trust me, it's true. Over the last four years, you may have felt foolish because a peer was more adept at a particular

subject than you, or you may now worry that the career path you've chosen isn't one you're cut out for. Comparison, my friends, is not only the thief of joy, but the slayer of authenticity. Believe in the plans you have made, believe in the things you have learned, believe in the community you've built. And most importantly, believe in the power you have to make a difference.

As three time Grand Slam tennis player Arthur Ashe stated, "Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can." My fellow Thunderbirds, we have everything we need to go out there and make the difference we not only need to make, but the impact we are destined to fulfill.

The last production I was in here at SUU was *The Secret Garden* and there's a song in the show called "Hold On." The beginning lyrics of the song say, "When you feel the storm is coming, see the lighting part the skies, it's too late to run, there's terror in your eyes...remember this old thing you heard me say, it's the storm not you that's bound to blow away." You're Thunderbirds; the storm is where you thrive—it is the

lightning that fuels you and the thunder that makes you stronger. I promise you, you are best equipped to sail your own ship through the storm and no amount of comparing yourself to the boats around you will make the endeavor any easier.

We tend to polarize our successes and failures in relation to what the success of others looks like. When we do so, we weigh our ingenuity quite harshly based on our own narrow view. Success can be as simple as deciding to drink more water or spending time with a friend. It can be apologizing for saying something unkind or forgiving someone for a similar misstep. Success is all around you, all the time! We have seen it every day for the last four years. I mean, look at what has been asked of you every day throughout the entirety of your degree, and look at how gloriously you have succeeded. You have spent the past four years defining and redefining what success looks like to you, and looking back, it can be easy to focus on the hardships. But at the same time, look at the growth. That is the ultimate success. We came here to learn and our understanding of personal success is exponentially more intricate and applicable. After all, you can only see how high you've climbed

once you've reached the summit and you can only see how high you've flown once you clear the clouds. Today, let us clear the clouds away for a moment and look at this beautiful horizon ahead of us.

Every day that we thought we wouldn't make it through, we survived. We've spent our entire lives working towards this exact moment. Sometimes it may have felt like we were chasing a fantasy, but my dear friends. Look around. It is not a fantasy any longer; it is real, it is happening, and it is all because of you and the work you put in to get here.

To continue my streak of quoting Academy Award winners, Octavia Spencer said, "It's your turn to choose and define what success means to you. Now, others will try to define it for you, but yours is the only voice that matters."

Once you decide what success looks like moving forward, go after it! It may be scary, but no one has ever done anything great without being absolutely terrified. And don't wait, either. There is never a convenient time to do something important. Find the opportunities that speak to you; that make your heart sing and your soul shine. And if you

can't find those opportunities, invent your own! Dream something new every day and bring your dreams to life! They're your dreams, you know best how to make them happen.

My friends, as we close out this brief yet tremendously formative era of our lives, it is my desire that you will trust yourself. Trust in the strength of your wings. Trust in the skills that you have spent four years sharpening and improving upon. And remember that any storm you face is a storm you are well prepared to weather.

In closing, I would also like to offer my sincere appreciation and gratitude to all the faculty and staff at SUU for their dedication in helping myself and this class of graduates soar on campus and beyond. Your efforts do not go unnoticed, and none of us would be here without any of you. To the people who've spent the last four years studying alongside me and lifting me up, I am eternally grateful for your friendship and I can't wait to see where you go next. And finally, to the Southern Utah University class of 2025, thank you. I may not know all of you, but I am astounded by the zeal and the courage with which you have faced the labor that comes with not only obtaining a degree, but

evolving into the person you were always meant to be. Know that you have so much more power than you could ever imagine. It's been the joy of a lifetime to be a part of the flock. As you spread your wings to depart this revered campus, remember that for you, the sky is not the limit, but merely the starting line. So go do what you do best and soar.

Congratulations, my wonderful and phenomenal class of 2025—and thank you so much!

Go T-Birds!

-End of speech-

{Applause}

CONFERRING OF DEGREES

HONORARY DOCTORATE DEGREES

PRESIDENT BENSON: Thank you **Abbie**, for that terrific message!

In public recognition of distinctive contributions, Southern Utah University confers honorary doctorate degrees upon those individuals who have been recommended by the Southern Utah University Board of Trustees under authorization of the Utah Board of Higher Education. Today we honor two individuals: **Jerry Anderson and Miles Killebrew.**