

Commencement Speech

Penn State Harrisburg

12-16-2023

Good Morning and welcome to family, friends, administrators, faculty and staff, esteemed guests, and the GRADUATING class of 2023!

From one Penn State Alumnus to another, Congratulations on this remarkable achievement! It is my sincere hope and desire that this may be the beginning of a journey that will enable and empower each of you to change the world we're living in and be relentless in finding a way to impact, create and leave an impression on everything you do and everyone you come across.

As you are sitting here this very moment, there is no doubt that you are experiencing a whirlwind of emotions swirling through your heart, your mind and your soul.

For all of you, today is a culmination of your sacrifice, commitment and deep desire to improve yourself, those around you and the communities in which you will work and live in.

The faculty, the student body, the culture and the diversity that exist at Penn State Harrisburg is unrivaled. The opportunities that have been afforded to each of you to learn, to explore, to improve, to be curious and to challenge each other are paramount to your success. What started just a few years ago with uncertainty and ambiguity has now crystallized into this moment.

From your 1st day to where you are seated right now, it has been an exhilarating ride filled with highs and lows, disappointment and defeat, friendships, plenty of “aha” moments and lessons that have been learned through trial and error.

Over this period of time, you've developed meaningful and significant relationships with your professors, your coaches, your advisors, your peers, and even strangers. The combination of your interactions, your experiences and the education that has been bestowed upon you has prepared each of you to immerse yourselves in this next chapter of your life.

The true litmus test of whether or not you will be successful beginning today will lie in your ability to transfer, carry over and apply the principles and values that you have learned while being a student at Penn State Harrisburg. Walt Disney once reminded us that, "Hard decisions are not hard to make when you know what your values are".

Your academic preparation at Penn State has leveled the playing field. The rigor, the quality, and the richness of what has been shared with all of you will be an integral component to discovering who you are and what you will become.

I was inspired early this week when I watched a video of the six student marshals selected to represent this graduating class. In watching Drake Collins, Ainsley Perry, Dustin Hyder, Sydney Trostel, Sydney Hemler and Jennifer Drissel, their stories reminded me of a book I read many years ago, titled, “**Grit: the Power and Passion of Perseverance**” by Angela Duckworth.

Angela's research demonstrated that grit is a better predictor of success in both the classroom and the workplace. It is a hallmark of high achievers in every field she has studied. The same grit she describes is the same grit that is in this giant center today.

To put it simply, there are no short cuts to success. And to be clear, you can be gritty while doing the

“G-R-I-D-D-Y” My 7 year old son taught me how to do the griddy a couple months ago. And if you feel like doing the griddy when you get your diploma this morning, I'm all for it.

Each of you graduating today are prepared to be the next catalyst to create the change we need in society. This graduating class comprised of students from 40 different countries and 40 different states is symbolic of our heritage and roots.

You are the representation and embodiment of our school chant, “**WE ARE, PENN STATE**”. Your educational journey at the associate, baccalaureate, graduate and doctoral level has positioned you to contribute to the fabric that will make our communities strong, proud, respectful and accepting regardless of where you came from or where you started.

We are struggling as a country and as a nation with our identity. Your graduation today is a call to action to help us move forward, to make progress, to bring us together, to heal, to restore and most importantly to contribute in a way that will recognize and appreciate our differences and backgrounds. As the great Maya Angelou once famously said, “We are more alike my friends, than we are unlike”.

For many of you, this journey has not been easy. Your parents, families and friends here today can attest to the incredible journey you have taken to get to where you are. For some of you, it was working a full time job to provide for yourself or your family. For some, it was balancing schoolwork with the responsibilities of being an athlete, a musician, or a caregiver. For some, it was just trying to make it through one day at a time, and for others, you learned how to create a support system built around you to ensure you get to the finish line.

All of you graduating today have given of yourselves to a large degree and to the extent possible to have this dream, goal and vision for your life realized surrounded by those who believe in you.

And as you did several years ago in pursuit of this milestone for you and your family, you will now find yourself starting again, but this time with the tools and resources necessary to be successful. You have now positioned yourself to go after your dreams, to chase your purpose and make your mark. While talent may grab headlines, remember that grit will always win the day!

I share my commonality with all of you as an alumnus of Penn State who worked and studied my way through college. When I was 13 years old, my mother was in prison and decided to enroll me in a boarding school called Milton Hershey. Milton Hershey School saved and transformed my life and gave me opportunities that otherwise would not have been possible to this young, rebellious, Latino kid from NYC.

One of the many opportunities Milton Hershey School provided was an academic scholarship to attend Penn State University, hence why I am standing at this podium before all of you today. Milton Hershey's gift enabled me to receive a world-class education at Penn State, and without it, my life would look very different than what it is today. Growing up, my life was fraught with poverty, violence, abuse and indescribable experiences. Those unfortunate events in my childhood helped me develop character, become resilient and lit a fire in me to become somebody. The environment at Penn State cultivated my passion for serving others. My experience was a formative one that enabled me to discover my true passion to restore healing in others and improve how we deliver healthcare in this country.

What started as a career as a registered nurse at the bedside 19 years ago, has evolved into dedicating the last 15 years of my life as a healthcare leader in NYC to doing everything I can to improve the health and well-being for thousands of New Yorkers.

In just a few hours, your life is going to be forever changed, just as mine was when I graduated from this great university. The story and life you create for yourself today, will be determined by each decision, habit and interaction you engage in. As you think about where you're going, reflect on the following question. **What is the legacy you're looking to create and what will be the impact you leave on others?**

I recognize this question is thought provoking which requires reflection and consideration. In doing so, I challenge all of you to consider the philosophy and thought of Peter Block, an American author and consultant.

Peter, was once asked, “How do you change the world? One room at a time. Which Room? The one you’re in.”

When things get difficult, because they will in this world. Remind yourself that each of you are here today because you have committed yourselves to a larger and more ambitious goal for your life, for your family and for those who never gave up on you. May today be the continuation of many significant accomplishments in your lifetime.

May you be bold, brave and adventurous in your pursuit of doing everything you can to be of service to others and to live a life of integrity, truth, and compassion.

Be a risk taker, keep an open mind and remember that you did not get here alone. In other words, don't forget to send the elevator back down when you have made it to the top. As you walk across this stage today and clutch your degree in your hand, may the experience, values and education that was provided to you at Penn State Harrisburg strongly move you to create the change that is so desperately needed in each corner of our community.

To every teacher, researcher, data analyst, engineer, future doctor, future nurse, business administrator, criminal justice major and every graduate at Penn State today, As you embark on your next step, we're reminded by Angela Duckworth that "enthusiasm is common, but endurance is rare". Life is not a race, although it may appear that way at times. Avoid competing with others and focus inherently on becoming the best version of who you are and what you represent. I applaud and commend each of you for the gift of who you are and what you will do to make an impact and create lasting change that will undoubtedly affect the course of lives for many human beings

If there's anything I can assure each of you as you're graduating today...it's this.... Nothing glorious has ever been achieved except by those who dared to believe that something inside of them was superior to their circumstances.

May God bless each of you and most importantly May God bless those sitting next to you that did everything they could to see that you would walk across this stage today.

From one alum to another, **WE ARE** and will always be Penn State!

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