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Chair, National Transportation Safety Board
Remarks Before The
Pennsylvania State University At Harrisburg – Capital College
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Harrisburg, Pa

Labor Day 2019. It's about 3 a.m.

The U.S. Coast Guard receives a distress call from the *Conception*: A small passenger vessel that's anchored about a mile off the coast of Santa Barbara.

Thirty-three passengers are on a recreational diving trip around the Channel Islands.

All of them are below deck in the bunkroom, sleeping, along with one crewmember.

A fire erupts on the main deck, right above them. The rest of the crew try desperately to get to them, to no avail. There's no way out.

The bunkroom has just two exits: The main exit and an emergency escape hatch. Tragically, both lead directly into the path of the fire.

The *Conception* burns to the waterline. Just after daybreak, it sinks, taking 34 souls along with it.

It remains the deadliest marine accident in recent U.S. history.

That's a somber start for such a celebratory day.

But it's the National Transportation Safety Board's mission... our *duty*... to show up on the worst days.

If you're not familiar with us, the NTSB is a small but mighty federal agency of about 440 dedicated safety professionals.

We lead safety investigations into our nation's highest-profile transportation accidents. We're best known for our work in aviation.

Your parents might know us from TWA Flight 800, which crashed into the Atlantic Ocean 12 minutes after takeoff from JFK in 1996. Or ValuJet Airlines Flight 592, which crashed in the Florida Everglades about 10 minutes after takeoff from Miami that same year.

You might know us from the show *Air Disasters*... or our investigations of the helicopter crash in Calabasas, California, that claimed the lives of 9 people, including Kobe Bryant and

his daughter, Gianna, in 2020. Or the door plug that flew off Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 at about 16,000 feet near Portland, Oregon, in January.

I led the on-scene investigative team for both events.

At the NTSB, we also investigate train collisions and derailments, like the one that devastated East Palestine, Ohio, last year — and forever changed Darlington Township, just over the Pennsylvania border.

And then there are the myriad motor vehicle crashes, marine accidents, and pipeline explosions we investigate.

The collapse of Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge, which was struck by the *Dali*, a large containership. We investigated the collapse of the Fern Hollow Bridge in Pittsburgh and the natural gas-fueled explosion and fire that occurred just 60 miles from here in West Reading.

We even investigate commercial space accidents.

Our role is the same following every event we investigate: To determine exactly what happened, why it happened, and, most importantly, how to prevent it from ever happening again.

It's true that we almost always show up on the "bad days."

I said *almost* always because, today? This is one of the good days. A "guaranteed-to-warm-your-heart" day. This is a "remember-this-forever" kind of day — and not just for you graduates! — but for the entire "village" who helped make your success possible.

Which is why I'm so grateful to Dr. Callejo Pérez, members of the board, and the distinguished faculty and staff for inviting me; thank you for this incredible honor.

And to today's graduates — my soon-to-be fellow alumni! — family and friends: Thank you for allowing me to join such a momentous occasion.

In debating what I wanted to share with you today, I thought a lot about my time here as an undergrad.

I thought about how much I hated the microfiche and its predecessor, the card catalog. You've probably never heard of them; your parents get me. I'm still not sure I ever learned how to use them...!

And for my fellow Humanities majors, I thought about all the math classes I avoided.

I thought about how my friends and I brought back the annual play — a Penn State Harrisburg twist on *A Christmas Carol* — and how I was lucky enough to intern for Senator Arlen Specter in his Harrisburg office for college credit.

But most of all, I thought about how I sat *exactly* where you are today 30 years ago, ready to start an exciting new chapter...one with perhaps a little uncertainty...and *maybe* a touch of apprehension about the impending pressures of adulthood.

You may be wondering how I went from Penn State to being the head of such a high-profile federal agency.

News flash: It wasn't my grades!

In 2020, during the height of COVID, when the NTSB wasn't launching to accidents, I decided to go back to school to get a master's degree in transportation safety.

You might be thinking, "*Why? Doesn't she know enough about transportation safety?*"

The answer is, "no"... always, "*no.*" You can *always* learn more.

See, I consider myself a lifelong learner.

I absolutely love learning new things, *especially* if it helps me be a better public servant. Helps me save lives. Challenges my thinking. Transforms how I lead.

But the best is learning something that changes my mind and reshapes what I "think" I know.

But back to grad school.

I had to order my transcripts to apply, and not just from Penn State; I was actually a transfer student. I arrived here as a junior after doing two years at Messiah College.

I'll never forget receiving those transcripts. All I could think was: "*Oh man, I should offer to pay my parents back for those first two years...!*"

But it *did* give me a good opening for my admissions essay to Clemson, which I started by saying: "*If you were just looking at my grades, you wouldn't let me in.*"

Let's see...Aerobics class.

Grade: F!

Y'all...I got an F in *Aerobics*!

If you're wondering how it's possible to fail Aerobics, it's easy: you don't show up—!

I'd say, "*Don't skip class,*" but it's a bit late for you.

Instead, I'll say it to my daughter, Lexi, who's here today, along with my husband, Mike. She'll be heading off to college in a couple of years, so we have plenty of time to do damage control.

Mark my words: This speech is gonna to come back to haunt me: “*But you got an F in Aerobics, mom!*”

So, there I was, debating what to say today when I looked at this transcript — again. As often happens, a book I recently read gave me the answer.

It’s called *Deserts to Mountaintops* by Jessica Buchanan. Jessica was a hostage in the desert, captured by Somali pirates. She was rescued by SEAL Team 6 in 2012.

The book is a collection of stories beautifully written by women who’ve faced significant challenges and how they overcame them.

One of the authors refers to this quote from John Maxwell:

*The more you do, the more you fail.
The more you fail, the more you learn.
The more you learn, the better you get.*

And boy, have I had more than a few failures!

There are the “mom fails;” just ask Lexi.

Again, there are my grades...like the “D+” I got in Oral Communications.

I wish I were kidding. And, yes, I see the irony in saying that standing at a podium. Take that, Messiah College!

But today, I want to tell you about a career setback. Don’t let that flattering introduction fool you; I’ve had my fair share, just like everyone.

My bio on the NTSB website states, correctly, that I joined the agency in 2018. It was, and remains, my dream job. My passion.

But what’s *not* on the website is far more interesting: It took me two tries to get to the NTSB.

In fact, none of my jobs came easy.

My first gig out of college: A staff assistant for a large association in D.C.

I thought I’d get a job on Capitol Hill easily, since I had done two internships for congressional offices.

Not so easy, as it turns out.

The House and Senate flipped in ‘94; everyone...and I mean everyone...was looking for a job on the Hill.

There I was: A staff assistant, answering phones, making copies, filing, and serving coffee.

You may find yourself doing the same after *you* graduate. You might not like it.

My advice: Learn to embrace it — *all* of it. Yes, even the not-so-glamorous stuff.

Never once did I think I “deserved” more because I had a college degree. Or that I was “overqualified.” Because, if you can’t do the basic job, the duties you were hired for, they will never entrust you with more.

That was always my motto: Do the job well — *exceptionally* — and someone will notice.

That’s exactly what happened at every stage of my career: As a lobbyist for the American iron and steel industry...at the AFL-CIO...to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters... even at my last stop before the NTSB as Staff Director on Capitol Hill.

Today, I still answer phones, make copies, file papers, and — well — I *order* coffee on my Starbucks app!

The first time I pursued a seat on the NTSB was no different.

It was 2015. I was on the Hill by that time and had nearly two decades of transportation safety experience. I knew I had the skillset. And I had the right connections.

It came down to showing that I was the right person at the right time.

I did everything in my power...really left my heart out on the field. *But it didn’t work out.*

Someone else was nominated for the seat.

Was I disappointed? Of course. I was devastated.

But I do believe...and have believed throughout my career... that where I am right now...this very moment...is where I’m *meant* to be.

Not getting the NTSB job gave me more time on the Hill. Time where I got to work for one of the most inspirational, hard-charging Members of Congress I’ve ever worked for. What I learned from him made me who I am today.

Looking back now, I see I wasn’t ready for the NTSB that first “go.” I needed that time.

Fast forward to 2017. I hear there may be another opening at the NTSB.

I was really conflicted.

So conflicted, in fact, that I took three full months over the summer to consider my next move.

Should I put myself “out there” again? Should I just stay where I am? What if I make a bad choice? What if I don’t get it?

But the loudest one was: *What if I fail... again?*

Eventually, I started asking myself the right question, and there was only one: *What if I succeed?*

What if I succeed?

The time I spent soul searching helped me realize that I didn’t just have to “get over” my fear of failure; I had to embrace it if I wanted to live fearlessly.

Uncomfortable as it may be, failing from time to time — not all the time! — is a small price to pay for living fully, for pursuing your dreams.

Too many of us say “no” to ourselves long before anyone else has the chance to. We take ourselves out of the running for things we want.

We sit on the sidelines. We make excuses. We don’t wanna risk it.

Let others tell you, “No.” Don’t beat them to it! When they do tell you, “No” — it will happen — try again anyway.

And *keep* trying.

Accepting failure is the price you pay for pursuing your dreams. I promise: It’s worth the cost, every time.

That’s why I’ve been sharing the “low lights” from my transcript and my career with you today. It’s not to be self-deprecating, or because failing Aerobics class is funny. (It’s actually *so* funny!)

It’s because I want you to know it’s OK not to be perfect. It’s OK to be human. *It’s OK to fail.* That doesn’t define you.

But what you do next? That’s where the magic happens.

Yes, there are days when it’s hard to get back on the proverbial horse.

On the hard days, and there are many, I think about a group of people whose resilience inspires me: The families of the 34 victims of the *Conception* dive boat.

I didn’t share this at the beginning, but I led the NTSB investigative team that responded to that tragedy.

I’ve remained close with the families. We even spent Labor Day Weekend together, which was the 5th anniversary of the disaster.

Despite experiencing unimaginable pain and loss, they've worked relentlessly for the last 5 years to make passenger vessels safer.

They inspire me to stand up when I get knocked down.

As they fight for safer marine regulations, they deserve to have someone fighting *for* them...fighting *alongside* them...to honor those they lost.

It's what *every* victim deserves.

Fighting for those who no longer have a voice: That's my "Why."

Somewhere along the way, on this exciting road of "real adulthood" that stretches out before you, you'll discover your "Why:" That intangible "thing" that keeps you going and sustains you, even on the hardest days. The worst days.

A lucky few of you may have already discovered your "Why." For some, it'll evolve over time. And, if you have no idea yet, that's OK! It'll come. *I promise.*

And when you have it, I hope you hold on to it. Use it as your inner compass. Let it guide you.

And when you fail...and you will...remember this alum. Remember that I got...a "C" in Finite Math and was denied a seat on the NTSB my first try. Remember that neither prevented me from living my dreams.

One day, a lucky one or two of you will be invited to this stage to share lessons you've learned since graduation. Maybe you'll even get to poke fun of yourself as you address the Capital College Class of 2054.

I credit and thank Penn State Harrisburg for giving that 20-year-old transfer student a second shot to turn it around.

Especially Millie Landis, who was the Registrar at the time; she showed me true compassion. Millie told me about her son; how he had a tough time but turned it around because someone gave him a second chance.

She issued me a challenge: Take five classes at a community college, get straight A's, and *then* transfer. That's exactly what I did.

By the way: My grades were much better at Penn State. I got straight A's in grad school...for the Humanities majors, even in automotive engineering and civil engineering!

In all seriousness, it was Penn State Harrisburg and Registrar Millie Landis who showed me that my so-called failures...and how I rose from them, again and again and again, *did* define me...made me who I am today...enabled me to lead with the same passion and compassion that Millie and every single professor showed me three decades ago.

That I could — not despite my failures, but because of them — live my dreams.

Some wise words from writer Rachel Fesko: “If I continue to hold my failures, my hands will always be full of my past, rather than reaching forward to my future.”

If I continue to hold my failures, my hands will always be full of my past, rather than reaching forward to my future.

When you toss up your graduation caps later, I invite you to throw away your past failures along with it. Today, you start a new chapter. *You* get to write your story; no one else.

As you navigate the weeks, months, years, and decades ahead, I hope you come to see your own setbacks, not as the end of the world, but as they really are: One of life’s most valuable teachers.

I hope you find your “Why,” and follow it to whatever exciting, world-altering future you dream of. Maybe even at the NTSB.

To the Class of 2024: I leave you with my heartfelt congratulations. May you travel safely: today, this holiday season, and always.

Thank you, thank you!