

Good morning,

I want to congratulate the graduating class of 2023 and help celebrate your extraordinary achievements. I know for some of you, it was a bumpy and sometimes windy path to get here, but you made it and I'm honored to share this incredible day with you.

I also want to thank the parents, the grandparents, cousins, friends, teachers and every special person in these students' lives for helping them to arrive at this moment today.

Finally, thank you, Chancellor John Mason and the brilliant, dedicated faculty of Penn State Harrisburg for inviting me to be part of this special day. I have much respect for this incredible institution.

Some of you have already secured your first job after today's graduation, some were lucky enough to be recruited by your employer months ago, some of you will be furthering your education, others may be taking a break.

After I graduated college, I didn't have anything lined up. So, I'm a bit sympathetic to those who may not know what your future exactly looks like, or even your next step.

Hopefully, you have heard from your parents, your friends, and your professors that this is completely normal.

Let me add my voice to theirs. But let me go a bit further and tell you with confidence that finding that one thing you are meant to spend your life doing probably applies to fewer of us than advertised.

In fact, specializing in one thing may even inhibit your maximum impact on this world. This is because the people we become, our values, our personalities, our experiences, these change over time. The career that fits comfortably in your twenties may not fit at all in your forties.

Let me make a point with my story. I started out as a nursing major and switched majors my junior year. I did so poorly, my nursing professors told me that there's life outside of nursing and pointed me to the door. I went into communications because I could graduate on time and pursue my dream of becoming a tv reporter. I landed my first on-air job after two years of constant searching and rejection.

I finally got my chance and anchored and reported for the next six years. My last reporting job brought me to Harrisburg. I got married and when I had my first baby, I decided to leave the news business. My entire salary as a news reporter would be the exact amount for full-time daycare for my baby. It didn't make a lot of sense to stay in the job.

I had invested 10 years of my life in the news business, being poor most of the time, to end up being a stay at home mom. I felt that I wasted a decade of my life.

During my break from the tv business, someone asked me to run for Harrisburg city council. I laughed out loud at the question. Why would I want to be a part of the craziness of politics? I had zero experience, but I did have a yearning to serve. It's what made me choose nursing in the beginning.

The crazy thing is that being a news reporter was the best preparation for being an elected official.

In the newsroom, we always started out asking in the morning meeting, what are the viewers thinking about. We then would build our newscast around that. Now, my focus is on the voters, the people, what do they care about What is important to them?

I would write news stories and scripts, it helps me now when I write my speeches. I used to research stories, now I research issues relating to bills. It was actually a very smooth transition.

As a news reporter, I learned how to interact with all types of people. I've interviewed a US vice-president, parents who lost their child to senseless gun violence, and a clown because the circus was coming to town. I had to win the trust of different people so they would speak to me on camera. I didn't realize these skills would be transferable.

A friend recommended a book by Daniel Epstein called RANGE. Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World.

This is a book that argues specialization can actually inhibit excellence. It tells dozens of stories and cites multiple research studies that demonstrate that truly innovative and impactful people quote: "sample widely, gain a breadth of experiences, take detours and experiment relentlessly."

The book tells the story of Oliver Smithies who was the 2007 Nobel Laureate who discovered a way to modify disease-causing genes so that they could be studied in animals. The interesting thing is that Smithies won the Nobel Prize as a geneticist working with DNA but he'd been trained and spent most of his career as a molecular biologist. Two very different fields. Smithies passed away 6 years ago but not before advising students over and over not to be afraid to "take your skills and apply them to a new problem, or take your problem and try completely new skills".

The book gives another example of Arturo Casadevall, who in 2015 was Chair of Microbiology and Immunology at Johns Hopkins University and one of the most productive scientists as measured by published papers ever, even more than Albert Einstein. Casadevall immigrated to the US from Cuba when he was 11 and from age 16 to age 20 he worked at McDonalds which he considers one of the most educational experiences of his life. His first degree was from a community college in pest control operations.

The point is there really are no wasted experiences and as you go through your career you are accumulating what may feel like useless knowledge but in reality, this knowledge will likely form the basis of useful insight down the road.

I also want to encourage you about the nation and the world you are emerging into. We have been all through a very rough few years and some cynicism about our country is understandable. And in case you parents think its the just these students that are gloomy, its not. According to the Economist magazine, four fifths of adults believe their children will be worse off than they are. This is compared to just two fifths in 1990.

But while our current era may seem tumultuous, the truth is that there has never been more opportunity for you graduates than there is today.

The American economy that you are blessed to join remains the world's richest, most productive and most innovative.

This will be to your benefit. We are rightly focused on making a more perfect union in the US but we should always remember that a better standard than perfection might be the relative experience of those in other countries.

American standards of living have been steadily rising so that the purchasing power of the average income in Mississippi, our lowest income state, is higher than the average income in all of France. It's not as gloomy as you might think.

And finally, when I was a new reporter, I would interview active senior citizens and ask what motivates them. One 90 year old told me that he serves other people because it helps him to forget his problems. I've taken his advice and it works. When you are in a rut and you can't get out of your head, I suggest getting out and serving. I know some of you were a big part of the We Care Food Pantry. You get it and I know you felt the rewards of helping your peers. What an amazing project!

What I'm most excited about for this graduating class is that you are part of a beautifully diverse class and generation. It comes naturally for you to accept each other without judgement and to be open minded about people's differences and uniqueness. I believe this class will help breakdown stereotypes and fight racism. You are the change.

This class is also one of the most resilient graduating classes in history. You have already learned how to deal with the unexpected, to be patient while a pandemic raged on, and to be flexible even when the future was uncertain. You are built for what is to come.

Graduating class of 2023, I wish you many blessings, much success, and you experience the satisfaction of fulfilling your purpose in life.

Congratulations!