

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Spring Quarter
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Richard F. Celeste
Governor
State of Ohio

Thank you very much.

Mr. President, members of the Board of Trustees, members of the Faculty, alumni, students, friends of the Ohio State University, and especially members of the Class of '85 who are about to receive degrees, and your justifiably proud families, I deeply appreciate this chance to be with you on this very special day in your lives.

I would like to share with you this morning brief reflections on three of the most unforgettable characters I know. Not Lee Iacocca or Desmond Tutu or Even Dagmar Celeste, who is my personal favorite among those splendid individuals who top your preferred list for today's speaker. Rather, I'd like to introduce you to, for just a few moments, Wally Smith, and Helen DeRobier, and Owen Quinn.

If I were to title these reflections as I was requested to, but I wasn't on time, I would title these reflections, "The Boundaries of Excellence."

Let me begin with Wally Smith.

It was thirty years ago and I was about to start my senior year at Lakewood High School. I had decided that I'd worked so hard all the way through school that I'd earned the opportunity to take at least one easy course. I chose first semester speech. It looked just right--almost no homework, no reading list and no tests. It was taught by Wallace P. Smith.

We met each day in the auditorium with three or four students who were assigned to make a particular sort of speech that day. It might be to persuade, to motivate or to humor, and Wally Smith would sit at the rear of the auditorium, quietly grading each student's performance on a scale of one to ten. And often, after the speeches were through, sharing his comments with the speakers and with the rest of us.

That was, until my first speech. Before I was finished with the first two paragraphs of speech, a voice boomed out at me from the rear of the auditorium, "Celeste, eye contact." As I moved through the speech, a few paragraphs later, this voice came out from the back of the auditorium, "Articulate." Towards the end of the speech, as I reached my conclusions, this voice came out, "Where's the logic of that statement?" I was stunned, challenged and even a little bit ashamed in front of my fellow students as Wally Smith came forward and summed up my performance by saying, "Celeste, you can do better."

And so it went. I devoted more and more time to each speech. And after punctuating them with comments, Wally Smith would ask, "Is that the best you can do?" And I worked harder. And I worked harder. And I worked harder just to silence him through one of my assigned speeches. That simple speech course became the toughest challenge of my high school career. And Wally Smith became my favorite teacher.

The one lesson he was determined to teach had little to do with public speaking. But a great deal to do with something else. It was a lesson about excellence. He said excellence is a gift we find within us as we set goals for ourselves and strive to achieve those goals. "You can do

better," Wally Smith said repeatedly.

And I did. Until one day he listened without interruption to my final speech in a class that I had taken because I thought it was going to be a breeze. Wally Smith.

Helen DeRobier.

She was 23 years old when I met her. She was a recent graduate of Boston College; majored in biology; loved to garden; and was bilingual in French. She was a Peace Corps volunteer who had been working for 18 months in a tiny village along the Sahara Desert in Senegal when Dagmar and I visited her at her village. Helen's assignment was to work with a women's cooperative in that village to establish a vegetable garden so that there would be more nutritious food for the marketplace of that town. We had lunch with Helen and some of the women she worked with and we visited the new garden which was showing signs of yielding its first crop of vegetables. Helen clearly enjoyed a very close and comfortable relationship with the villagers and they all shared a tremendous sense of excitement and pride in the historic change they were building together in that village.

What made Helen's presence and success so remarkable was the fact that Helen DeRobier was legally blind. She could not see the ground at her feet. When her mother wrote her a letter from home in Boston, the letters were always in very large print and Helen had to hold the paper right up against her nose to read it. I asked Helen how people in the village thought about having a blind Peace Corps volunteer in their midst. She responded, "Dick, they don't know I'm blind." When I said, "You have to hold a piece of paper against your

nose when you read it." And she laughed and she said, "I'm the only person in this village who knows how to read. I expect they think everyone reads with the paper against their nose."

Helen DeRobier, who viewed herself as a very ordinary person, reminded me in a dramatic fashion that everyone, everyone is capable of extraordinary achievement. The boundaries are set by our own vision of ourselves. When I asked Helen what she had gotten from her 18 months with Peace Corps service in that African village she thought for a moment and she responded with a stunning phrase. She said, "I've been given the gift of new eyes to see these people as I'd never seen them before, to see my own country from a fresh vantage point and to see myself and my potential."

"I've been given the gift of new eyes," Helen DeRobier said.

Wally Smith and Helen DeRobier.

And, finally, Owen Quinn.

I became acquainted with him about ten years ago when I was lieutenant governor when he was a 32-year-old father of two, an unemployed iron worker in New York city. We met this way.

I was driving I-71 toward Cleveland when a short news item on the radio caught my attention. It said a young man had caused a noon-time traffic jam in the Wall Street district of New York by jumping off the World Trade Center and parachuting safely to the street. That was it. But the next morning the Plain Dealer carried a bit longer story. And a photograph. The facts were these: Owen Quinn, an unemployed

iron worker, had indeed jumped off the World Trade Center Tower and he'd done so for a cause. When he was released from the police station where he was taken after his jump, he was interviewed and asked why he did it. And his response was, "Because it was the only thing I knew how to do well to call the attention of an uncaring city and an uncaring nation to the problems of hunger in our midst."

The story noted that Quinn had made 67 parachute jumps when he was in Vietnam. And further that he'd been arrested and charged with trespassing and reckless endangerment for having climbed to the top of the World Trade Center and jumping off.

The story moved me to write Owen Quinn. I sent him a note and thanked him for what I thought was his unusual and quite extraordinary act. And several weeks later I received a letter back in a large envelope at the lieutenant governor's office. Owen Quinn thanked me for my note. He said in it, in his letter, "I want you to know that I did what I did partly for a selfish reason. You see, but for the grace of God, my children could be hungry, too." And he enclosed for me in that envelope an 8½, an 8 X 10 photograph of him poised against the skyline of New York as he was about to tumble off the 105th story of that building. You could feel the incredible risk which that very personal act involved in the photograph. As I looked at the photograph I realized that it was inscribed, "To the Celeste family from Owen Quinn" and then simply, "Matthew, Chapter 19, Verse 26."

Well, that passage of scripture, noted by Owen Quinn on his photograph, happens to be the motto of the state

of Ohio, "With God, All Things Are Possible."

Owen Quinn, who I've never forgotten though we've never met, taught me that excellence requires that we be willing to take a risk for others sustained by a common faith. The boundaries of excellence, whether in our personal lives or in our public policy, start from within us. Those boundaries stretch as far as our vision can see. And those boundaries reach out to embrace others.

Wally Smith sought out excellence as the gift within us; Helen DeRobier lived out excellence with her gift of new eyes; and Owen Quinn took the risk of excellence. "One thing I knew how to do really well," he said, as a gift to be shared with others.

For all of you, especially in the Class of '85, I pray for you and for all of us the recognition of excellence within, the vision of excellence beyond, and the faith to share that excellence with others both in our personal lives and our public policies.

Thank you very much and congratulations.