

A Future as Big as the West Texas Sky

Commencement Address

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President Kirwan, members of the Board of Trustees, fellow faculty, graduating students, distinguished guests, and our very special guests: the parents, friends and loved ones of our students.

First, I have to tell you how very honored I am to speak at such an important occasion.

And second, I want to say that I know how disappointed you must have been when you learned that Ohio State's speaker for spring commencement will be Bill Cosby - and you get stuck with some physicist. And it's not even a famous physicist - like Stephen Hawking or Leonard Nimoy.

Usually, when people learn that I'm a nuclear physicist, I get this blank stare, and I can almost see the words flashing inside their heads. "Nuclear weapons." "Nuclear waste." "Springfield Nuclear Power Plant," the employer of one Homer Simpson.

But in June? Bill Cosby. Well, I sympathize with you completely. I'd rather be sitting out there with you and listening to Bill Cosby, too!

So, to make yourselves feel a little better, take a moment and think of all the money you'll save by not paying for tuition, books, room and board, and pizzas next quarter.

My one consolation is that commencement speakers are like the deceased at an old-fashion Irish wake. They need you to have a party, but nobody expects you to say very much.

Anyway, I am very grateful for having the opportunity to make a brief address to this class. I feel especially honored because, technically, this is Ohio State's very first graduating class of the new millennium.

In a brand new book called "Millennial Rising: The Next Great Generation," the authors, Neil Howe and William Strauss, predict truly great things for the generation that starts with today's college students.

They interviewed hundreds of young people across the country, and

they say that this generation is exceptionally caring, optimistic, teamwork-oriented, and like the G.I.s who fought in World War II, is poised for greatness on a global scale.

This is a generation that will impact the future of the world.

What a great testament to you - and to your parents and loved ones! Your success and your bright future was nurtured by their support, and your values reflect their concerns for you and for the future of the world.

That future is what we're here to celebrate. Your future - and all the work that you and your parents and loved ones have done to build that future.

By furthering your education and earning your degree, you have the opportunity to make your impact on the world.

Your future is like the incredible West Texas night sky that I used to gaze at when I was a little girl - truly unlimited.

It was that vast and wonderful night sky that led me to become a scientist.

The novelist Graham Greene once wrote: "There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in."

For me, that moment came when I was just four years old and staring at that vast and wonderful night sky. My mom refers to that moment as "the night I caught the star bug." Fortunately, instead of trying to cure me, my parents encouraged me. While other parents were reading "The Three Bears," mine picked up the encyclopedia and read to me about stars and planets. They took me to McDonald observatory. And I was hooked. At a tender age, I knew I had to be a scientist.

I fell in love with science, and it became my greatest passion.

As Albert Einstein said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science."

I'm fascinated by the challenges and the questions of science.

These are big questions we're trying to answer. Like: What's the fate of the universe? Or how can we make DNA computers? Or will we ever have a theory of everything? I certainly hope not, because I'd like to keep my job.

Yes, I truly love my career, but looking back about five decades ago, my decision to become a scientist really wasn't very rational. Just think

about it: Can you imagine that a little girl growing up on the West Texas plains in the 1940s - would become a nuclear physicist, and that her name was Bunny? And that is my real name!

I'm sure that many of you have made - and will continue to make - career choices that aren't completely rational. But I tell you, one thing I've seen again and again in my career is that when you're looking for your future, it's always best to follow your passions.

And, of course, when you're a generation that's poised for greatness - when you have a future in front of you as big as the Texas sky - you can never let obstacles get in the way of your passions.

And, yes, you will face obstacles - almost daily.

For me, those obstacles started right away. When I started college, there was no astronomy department, so I decided to go into physics.

I found that physics was fun (Is that the first time you've ever heard the words "physics" and "fun" in the same sentence?). I ignored, I don't know how many comments like: "Bunny, why don't you go into library science?" "Bunny you should learn to type." Physics was not supposed to be women's work.

However, I figured that intelligence was not linked to the Y chromosome.

It wasn't easy being a female scientist back then. There just weren't very many role models outside Marie Curie, who had won Nobel Prizes in Physics and Chemistry back around the turn of the century.

When I was in school, there were no women students in my physics classes. There were no women teaching physics. And there were no women physicists in any of the places I worked until I came to Ohio State.

In fact, I didn't meet another woman physicist until I was 27 years old. It was at a meeting of the American Physical Society. As you can imagine, we were both thrilled.

Then, in 1963, Maria Goeppert Mayer won the Nobel Prize in Physics. In 1960 she and her family had moved to La Jolla California where she held her very first paying job as a physicist. Her work had a great impact on my research. She had done groundbreaking work on the Nuclear Shell Model that changed the course of nuclear physics, and now

she had won the biggest prize that can go to a scientist.

The next day after the big news, her local newspaper came out with this headline: "La Jolla mother wins Nobel Prize."

Today, the future is much brighter for women in science. Now, I see many young women at the professional meetings. They're smart and committed. They're giving great talks. And this makes me so very, very happy.

Indeed, I'm often amazed and thrilled at the work I see all of our students doing today. I'm very excited about what I see happening here at Ohio State. This place is so full of energy. With the leadership of President Kirwan, with the world-class research from my faculty colleagues, and with the creative and ambitious work of our excellent students, Ohio State is truly climbing to the summit of America's public universities.

I thank Ohio State for allowing me to pursue my passion for science over the past 32 years - and for giving me a second passion: teaching.

Working with students is a genuine joy. I've acquired a new world of knowledge from you and from all those students who came before you, and I will always be indebted. So on this day when we all say "Congratulations" to you, I also want to add, "Thank you."

More than 60 years ago, a little girl gazed out in wonder at the stars in the Texas sky, and she was filled with the dreams of tomorrow.

Now, I've come full circle.

Today, this old Texas girl is gazing out with wonder and with pride at the stars gathered here this morning. And today, we are all filled with great dreams of tomorrow.

Congratulations to you all. And no matter what path you take, no matter what challenges you face, no matter what goals you achieve, I hope that you will always pursue your passion. This life is yours alone to live. Cherish it.

Buckeye graduates, I wish you great joy. Live long and prosper.

Thank you.