

Commencement Remarks by Yvette McGee Brown
Winter Commencement, The Ohio State University
Sunday, March 22, 2009
St. John Arena

President Gee, members of the Board, deans and faculty members, proud families and friends, and, especially, Graduates: Congratulations on this wonderful day! It is my great honor to share it with you.

I am thrilled to be back in this grand old arena. In the midst of March Madness, allow me to quote an Ohio State graduate who spent a huge amount of time here in this building. Coach and Commentator Bobby Knight has said: “Most people have the will to win. Few have the will to prepare to win.”

Today, we celebrate your preparation. Your determination. Your victory. It is your day.

In preparing for this occasion, I have thought back to my own graduations. In particular, I recall the day I gave the class address at the commencement ceremony of the newly desegregated Mifflin High School here in Columbus.

The occasion was held on the Ohio State campus, just up the street, at Mershon Auditorium.

That was a long time ago – 31 years!

Our workplace sitcom? “Laverne and Shirley.” Now? “The Office.” We had The Blues Brothers. Now it’s the Jonas Brothers.

Our romantic ballad? “You Light Up My Life.” The top song today? “My Life Would Suck Without You.”

Our Desperate Housewives? Those Ewing [U-ing] women on “Dallas”! We watched “Fantasy Island.” Now it’s “reality island” on “Survivor.”

Queen's "We Will, We Will Rock You" was not yet a sport anthem. And "Y.M.C.A." was a new song, not the second-most popular "arm-spelling" song in the world, behind "O-H-I-O."

Much has changed since that 18-year-old girl stepped to the podium at her high school graduation. . . for me, and for all of us. In a way, I feel as if I have come full circle.

As you think about the world when you graduated from high school and where we are today, you, too, see enormous changes -- not all of them welcomed or good.

You and your families are grateful that your investment in higher education has allowed you to complete your degrees. But, they are all asking: What now? Will you find a job? Not just A job, but THE job.

I firmly believe that this is an exciting time to be stepping forward, to be seeking your place in the world.

At the Presidential Inauguration in January, Elizabeth Alexander presented a poem which includes the lines:

"I know there's something better down the road. We need to find a place where we are safe. We walk into that which we cannot yet see." End quote.

You are moving into opportunities that, perhaps, you cannot yet see. As graduates of The Ohio State University, you are prepared for a world that is changing faster as it becomes smaller. You have the opportunity of a global perspective and nearly unlimited reach.

You can live and work abroad. You can live here and work abroad. You can communicate instantly with other cultures. Your choices are many. Your opportunities to innovate and create a different world are great. Your leadership and engagement are crucial.

This economy is causing all of us to rethink what has become our customary way of living.

We now have an opportunity – whether we want it or not – to re-examine our values and whether we have been living them every day.

My generation has been too much caught up in acquisitions and mergers. Not only the corporate-type that we hear so much about on the business news, but the personal quest to grab the brass ring, right now. Go to the right schools. Get the right jobs. Own the right cars. Vacation at the right spots. Have the right clothes. For too many, consumerism has been the yardstick and our “stuff” has been the measure of success.

We all see where that has gotten us, individually and collectively.

Whether you are wearing Jimmy Choos or Hush Puppies, when the economy fails, we all suffer. As Dr. Martin Luther King said: “We are all bound by an inescapable mutuality. What happens to one impacts all.”

Never has that sentiment been more powerful than now.

We are on the cusp of opportunity. Your generation will truly change the world. I know you expect to hear a line like that at commencement, but it is true. You can decide to live a greater life than accumulation and prosperity. You can choose to live a life of purpose. A life where people matter more than things.

It is time to be significant, not just successful. Let me repeat that: It is time to be significant, not just successful. What is the job of your dreams? Where do you think that you can make the greatest contribution to society?

Some of you have a pretty clear idea of what you want. But it could be that right now, that is not available to you. Others of you feel as though you are walking into a place you cannot see. The direction is not clear.

I did not have a clear destination in mind when my journey began. I was born in 1960 to a poor, single, teenage mother. Statistically, my prospects were not great. But my mother and my grandmother didn't allow circumstances to limit my choices. My grandmother always said: "It doesn't matter where you start; it matters where you finish".

In that same spirit, a high school adviser convinced me to go to college. A journalism professor at Ohio University made me believe that I could go to law school. When I needed them most, I found mentors, role models, and friends to take the journey with me. I learned that it is OK to lean on others – in fact, it is essential. Excellence requires the presence of others! That is as true today as it was for me as a young, aspiring lawyer.

It was not always smooth sailing however. When I received my law degree from Ohio State, I faced a mountain of student loans. I know that many of you understand the panic of wondering how you can ever pay them off. I did it. It took me 12 years. But I did it.

I may have been able to do it sooner if I had made different career choices. But I knew that I would be happiest in public service. I wanted to work with young people – like many I had known all my life – kids for whom choices were challenges and consequences were too often negative.

I decided a long time ago that I wanted it to matter that I was here. I don't just want to accumulate wealth. I want to make a difference.

That passion for serving children led me to the Ohio Department of Youth Services and, later, to the judiciary.

At 32, I was the youngest elected judge in Ohio and the first African American on the Franklin County Court of Common Pleas, Division of Domestic Relations and Juvenile Court.

But after nine years, I needed more. I was tired of seeing children chewed up in a system of foster care and court hearings. I wanted to go upstream, as the parable says and stop children from being thrown in the river, rather than just pulling children out of the river downstream.

In 2001, a unique opportunity came my way. Nationwide Children's Hospital and the Columbus Coalition Against Family Violence created The Center for Child and Family Advocacy, the first of its kind in the country to integrate child abuse and domestic violence services. I am honored to be the founding President of this nationally-recognized model for stopping the cycle of child abuse and domestic violence.

The Center is a collaboration of physicians, therapists, law enforcement, child welfare, prosecutors, and family advocates all united to treat and prevent child abuse and family violence. It is the perfect blend of my passion, my voice and my professional experience.

I am telling you the story of my career to make a point: **We don't always know the destination. We can't know and often can't control the circumstances around us. But, if we have a strong sense of who we are and who we want to be, if we have honed our skills and kept an eye on our moral compass, opportunities will be there.**

My wish for all of you is that you find your voice. Vocation comes from the Latin word for "calling" which comes from the word for "voice". Therein lies the truth of what your life's work should really be –

Something that calls to you!

Something that you have a passion for;

Something that gives voice to who you are and what you want to say to the world!

If you can't find that perfect job, seek one that starts you along the path.

Consider graduate school or further education. Look into AmeriCorp or the Peace Corp.

Find an internship with a non-profit, in public service, or in the private sector.

These kinds of opportunities will help define your direction and find your voice!

Let your interests be your guide. Listen to your feelings about work. Find something that energizes you and brings out your best. Seek to be significant. Success will follow.

Your alma mater expects you to use your education for the greater good of the community. Beyond your career, volunteer for issues and causes that stir you. Lend your expertise to organizations and individuals in need. Some of my most enjoyable and rewarding experiences have come as a volunteer. Furthermore, I have gained lifelong friends through a shared commitment to community.

Raise your hand. Walk in and offer your time. Sign up. Step up. You will be glad you did.

I have a few more pieces of advice, as is expected of a commencement speaker.

The first I offer as a parent. It is the same advice that my husband and I gave our daughters at graduation: You have six months, after which you need to be out of our house.

Life is all about teachable moments. And this is the moment when you learn about growing up, independence, and personal responsibility. We will take down your posters and trophies and turn your room into our home office. It is time for a new chapter for ourselves, with one less person in the house!

I also ask all of you to be good family members. Today, families come in many shapes and sizes. In all cases, I urge you to respect one another. Listen to one another. Support one another. Have high expectations of one another. Love one another. **And, in the words of that great philosopher Beyonce, “If you like it, put a ring on it!”** Strong families are the foundation of a civil society.

Graduates, I know that you are bright and have much to say to the world. But, I advise you that it is not necessary for all the world to hear everything . . . forever. You do not yet know who you are going to be. What seemed a brilliant thought when you were 22 will likely change and evolve over your lifetime. I encourage you to keep a journal, to write down your questions and ideas. But, I caution: do not write them in the blogosphere.

Whether it is potential employers or future in-laws, your name will be Googled. That YouTube video that was hilarious to your friends at 19 and that rant that you wrote after listening to cable news will inhabit your life like Marley's ghost. Live more of your life off-line.

It is the people around you who will help you on life's journey. Your family and friends. I advise you to surround yourself with strong, capable people who care about you and your community.

Here at the university, advisors and counselors have been easily available. Out there in the world of work, you need to build your own network of support.

Watching "Dr. Phil" and "Oprah" won't get you through life's inevitable bumps. You need a team around you if you want to be a "winner."

Build a team of confidants who you trust and admire. Look around among your peers and identify a few people whose opinions you value. Include some whose life experiences and views are different from yours – who think you are wrong and they are right much of the time. Their challenges will help you grow. And among them, lifelong friendships will blossom.

Going forward, remember that change is the consequence of choices. Understand that. I ask you to hold yourself and others accountable for choices and for their consequences. If you don't like the way things are, make different, better choices that will affect change.

As Chair of The Ohio State University Alumni Association Board of Directors, I urge you to stay close to this remarkable institution. It will continue to be a source of education, enlightenment, and great joy throughout your life.

My final piece of advice, on life's journey; don't forget to enjoy the ride. There have been times in my life when I have been so focused on the future, I have failed to appreciate and enjoy the present.

As Gandhi advised: Take care of this moment. Don't lose your sense of humor. That is a lesson for all of us – not just the graduates.

When the news is grim and the headlines reach into the lives of family and friends, it is easy to get discouraged.

I urge you to find the joy in each day.

I remember my mother saying “Make your own fun.” And we did. As with so many things we learn from our mothers, her advice is even more important today. “Make your own fun.”

Take responsibility for your happiness. Bring joy to others. Do good in the world.

Find your passion, and you will find joy.

May your good works shine a light on this university and on all of us.

CONGRATULATIONS!!!