



Castleton University

Thank you all very much, and congratulations to the class of 2017. It's a privilege to be here with you and your families to celebrate this incredibly important milestone.

I want to start by noting that I cannot, for the life of me, remember who the commencement speaker was when I graduated, or what their message was.

So, I'm really hoping that, even if you don't remember I was your commencement speaker, you remember this message: The best is yet to come!

You were probably told when you graduated from elementary school that great things were ahead of you, that middle school and high school would be more challenging, but also more rewarding. Someone probably said it would take hard work and a positive attitude, and with those tools you would go on to accomplish great things.

They might have even read you a Dr. Seuss book. I won't do that today, even though everyone does love a good Dr. Seuss story.

Then, at your high school graduation someone probably said your next steps – whether they were to college or an early career – while trying at times, would be some of the best experiences of your life.

And now, you may be expecting me to tell you that the knowledge you have honed over the last few years will ensure great things are ahead of you. I'm supposed to tell you that there will be trials and tribulations, but that you can march forward into a future with confidence. Because this is what we're supposed to say to graduates.

The fact is, these things are all true if you continue to work to make them so. If you never stop listening and learning, never stop exploring, never stop expanding your comfort zone, and never stop finding enjoyment and fulfillment in your life, in your work, and in your relationships.

If you do all of this, and remember the real things you've learned at every level of school, life will indeed get even better.

That's the essence of education, isn't it? That we learn to listen to learn, and to lead. And that we develop the skills to be the best we can be with the attitude to apply them positively, and the strength to lean on them – and other people – when times get tough.

Speaking of strength and positive attitudes, I want to recognize my friend Dave Wolk, a man of impeccable character and integrity, who today is celebrating his final Commencement as President of this University after a career of public service.

He has listened, learned, and led his entire life, and under his guidance, Castleton University has done more for you than awarding the degree you're about to receive. In this ever-intensifying global market for talent, you need the tools and skills necessary to compete.

And this University has delivered.

I realize some of you already know you're going into business, and a few are heading to serve our country in the military. Others will become engineers, artists, computer scientists, journalists, public servants, teachers, accountants, and so much more.

And to those of you who aren't quite sure, here's a little secret: I wasn't sure at your age either. And there are days when I'm still not sure. And I turned out okay, or at least I think I have.

My path wasn't straight, and it wasn't always easy. I may be a Governor now, but when I was 11, my Dad passed away from wounds he sustained in the World War II D-Day invasion, leaving my mom to raise three rather rambunctious boys. And that made my teachers, one in particular, really important to me.

That teacher, a guy named Dick Flies, inspired me enough to channel my love of working with my hands to focus on teaching others that skill. So, I went to UVM and studied to be a Tech Ed teacher because of my love to build, create, craft and problem solve.

After my student-teaching experience I discovered that it just wasn't right for me, so I went into business. But I never regretted going to school, and to this day I still use some of what I learned, even way back then.

Twenty years ago, I didn't have a political bone in my body, no interest in politics whatsoever. But as a business owner I started to complain about what "they" – "them" in the legislature – were doing to me and my business. So, I decided to stop complaining, step up and be part of the solution. I ran for the state senate. And the rest, as they say, is history.

But I'm not here today to share my autobiography. My point is this: you never know what hand you're going to be dealt, where your educational experience will lead you, where you're going to end up, or maybe even how you're going to get there.

And, that's okay. Don't over think it. That's part of what makes life so darn interesting.

Here's the thing: if you promise yourself you'll never permanently settle for a job you really don't want, in a life you didn't envision, you will find your passion, make a difference and most importantly, find fulfillment.

To be clear, I'm not saying that you shouldn't do work you don't like because I've done my share of that over the years. It's just not practical or mature. What I am saying is that it is always important to be looking forward to being better as a person, as an employee or employer, as a family member, and a friend.

I'm also saying to not be afraid of pursuing opportunities when they come along. Try new things and take risks. If you don't put yourself out there, you're selling yourself short.

Of course, no matter how hard you work, there will be times in your life when you're apprehensive and

not quite sure you've got what it takes. You might think to yourself: there must be someone better out there that's more capable. You might even want to give up after life throws you a curve.

If you find yourself in that situation, if you hesitate to pursue a dream job or take a risk, keep this quote from the Hockey Great, Wayne Gretzky, in mind: "you miss 100% of the shots you don't take."

So, take that shot, and even if you don't get what you're shooting for, always be the person who wants it the most, gets to work first, goes that extra mile. Because people notice that I notice that! And remember, sometimes it's the little things in life that people remember.

And that brings me to the importance of teamwork. Throughout my life, whether in business, politics, or racing, I've been successful because of the people I surround myself with. It's the quality of my team.

Teams know how to work together, how to encourage and look out for each other, how to hold each other accountable in constructive ways, and, ultimately, how to put the team ahead of their own interests.

I've tried to build my teams in life adhering to what I call the Four C's: character, competence, commitment and chemistry.

First, Character. Does the person have integrity? Are they honest, helpful and kind? If not, they don't get much further from my perspective.

Second, are they competent: Does the person have the skills needed to do the job, or learn, and contribute to the team.

Third, do they have commitment? Are they responsible? Do they invest themselves fully in the mission? Do they work hard and have a sense of duty to the team? Do they value results?

And the last "C" is chemistry. It's very difficult to define, sometimes it's just your gut telling you whether they have it or not. This "C" is key. Is the person able to work well with others? Do they have the right attitude? Are they enthusiastic, nimble and able to adapt to the needs of the team as a whole?

Because you can put all of the smartest, most talented and hardest working people in the world together in one room, or in one business, or on one project, and they won't be successful if there isn't good chemistry.

Being able to support your teammates and work with others effectively is invaluable. That means listening to all ideas with an open mind. Being willing to compromise, and being willing to give others credit. This is really important. There's no "I" in team. When you're committed to your team and its goals, you're happy to do that, because the shared objectives are always more important than your individual goals.

This is a perspective that will serve you well as you move forward in life. It's also a perspective that might help ease the increasingly divided political dialogue across our nation.

When looking at the state of our country, especially in Washington, D.C., you might feel anger, apprehension or frustration. I certainly do at times.

You might think that nobody seems to care about what other people think, that we are so terribly polarized by ideology and that we've lost a sense of respect for one another as Americans or as human beings.

Well, here in Vermont we can be a leader on another front each and every day. We can prove this is not how it needs to be, and the national narrative doesn't need to define us. Because we won't let it. We all have an obligation to be better role models, an example for our children.

The truth is, sometimes it's a challenge and sometimes things get heated, even in Vermont. But by-and-large, I try to treat others with the same dignity and respect that I would want to receive.

So, here's my challenge to each of you. You are the ones who will shape our future, here in Vermont and elsewhere. So, let's set an example for others. And always remember that it's usually the little things, like a simple adherence to the Golden Rule that can make the biggest difference.

Today, you finish a chapter of your lives. But remember, it's just the beginning. It may be an important chapter, but it should not be the best. That outcome, however, is entirely up to you, and where you choose to go. But to be perfectly honest I hope you look and find an opportunity to stay in Vermont. It's an incredible place full of extraordinary people. And you could be one of them.

In closing, I'd like to humbly offer you a few words I try to live by:

Always treat others the way you wish to be treated. It's really a pretty simple concept.

Understand how we act when we're not in the spotlight is just as important as how we act when we're on center stage or on the field.

Owning and learning from our mistakes is character building. Those mistakes are only weaknesses if we don't use them to make ourselves better and stronger.

And finally: understand the importance of integrity. Because at the end of the day, it's how most of us will be remembered.

Congratulations class of 2017. Go forward, always work to be better. Because "the best is yet to come."

Thank you.