

May 18, 2013

Follow Your Passion, Serve Others, Do the Right Thing

Hon. John M. Gerrard, United States District Court

Good evening. Acknowledge graduates, families, friends, alumni, and faculty. Thank you very much, Dr. Ohles. Much kinder, gentler lead-in than I received in my last engagement . . . which actually occurred fairly recently. I had the privilege of performing my first cousin's wedding, and one of my favorite uncles, an 88-year-old bartender of Czech heritage, came up right before the ceremony and said, "You know John, the secret to a **really good speech** is to start strong and end strong (to which I smiled) . . . and the less time there is between those two events, the better the speech." And I will try to follow that advice today.

But I am very honored to be your commencement speaker today--this is a university that I cherish, and this love affair grows deeper as the years pass by. What an impressive group of graduates—there is some serious horsepower in the class of 2013, from top to bottom. The scholarships and fellowships that have been earned, three graduates earned Fulbrights this year, there is a Truman Scholar, Eric Jackson will be going to the country of Georgia as a Gilman Scholar, and the list of law schools, medical schools, and graduate programs that will be attended--

quite impressive! And many of you have landed real jobs! I am proud to be associated with all of you as a fellow Nebraska Wesleyan graduate.

Before I go on, I am going to break with my own unwritten rule regarding not singling out individual students--but just for a minute. This past year I have had the privilege of working with (on the Board of Governors), and getting to know Philip Bakken and Jordan Klimek. And this is not to elevate them above others, but to illustrate the type of student Nebraska Wesleyan attracts. Phil is an economics major from Fremont, Nebraska. He was twice elected by his peers as president of the Student Affairs Senate, and his list of accomplishments at NWU is dizzying. Phil will be starting a job with the Arbor Foundation a week from Monday. Jordan is a biochemistry and molecular biology major from Burwell, Nebraska. He also has served on the Board of Governors, has a stellar academic record and applied to numerous law schools. Jordan will be attending an obscure school in the northeast, Harvard Law School. I wish all of you would have had the opportunity that we, on the Board of Governors, have had to listen to these students' questions, insights, and perspectives throughout the course of the year. If these two young men are representative of the student body, and I believe in every way that they are . . . I can report to you, ladies and gentlemen, that this University and this state is in a healthy place.

But let me say . . . somebody raised all of these young men and women (this all did not happen in 4 years at NWU). When I say I am honored to speak to you

today, that includes speaking to your families and friends. Because believe me, getting here today is a family matter. Sometimes, college students do not fully realize how deeply family, spouses, or roommates are going through this with you. I know I did not as a college student.

So graduates, I would like you to take a second here to say thank you with a round of applause to those who stood by you, and put up with you, and supported you.

But this is your day--the students graduating today. It's a happy day for you and your families. No more classes, no more tuition and fees . . . but most importantly an opportunity to look back on a job well done. I graduated from this institution 37 years ago, and it seems like yesterday. I have many fond memories of Nebraska Wesleyan . . . but the greatest memories are the friendships formed and the bonds that are forged over 4 hard-driving years. And I can tell you that the greatest college friendships will continue to deepen over the next, many years. But it will not be limited to college classmates, it will include former professors and many other Wesleyan connections.

As I look around this platform, and colleagues in the audience, I see many examples. I want to mention one this evening. Back in the spring of 1975, when I was a snot-nosed 21-year-old, I took a political science class from a young professor by the name of Jan (John) Vermeer (who was recognized earlier tonight). John had the radical idea, back then, of teaching without a text book. He would

have his class read historical pieces, along with modern pieces, and analyze the materials within the context of current political discourse. I learned how to critically analyze and shape my thoughts, in many ways, in Professor Vermeer's course(s). He helped formulate my critical thinking skills, and in many ways his class(es) shaped my career choices. So, for those of you that do not like some of my legal opinions, now and in the future . . . you now know who to blame--John Vermeer. In seriousness, I mention Professor Vermeer because our relationship was much more than teacher—student, it continued on throughout my professional years. Roughly every other year, I would look forward to receiving a telephone call from John Vermeer to help question, groom, and vet the next potential Truman Scholar coming out of Nebraska Wesleyan.

Thus, I urge you to come back often and give back to the college; you will never need a name badge when you come back to NWU. This is a **special place** from which you are graduating today. This faculty is bright, engaged, passionate, and has cared about you for 4 years . . . and I can tell you that the care, and sharing in your future success, lasts well beyond tonight.

Graduates, I hope you will take a brief opportunity to look back on a job well done, today. But a day like today is also an opportunity to look, with hope, toward the future. I know that most of you are just getting started in life . . . and some of you have come back to start a second career, or are in the midst of a career and you are enhancing your education in your chosen vocation or profession.

Because of your varying backgrounds, you all have very different plans and hopes for the future, so it may be a little presumptuous for me to tell you a couple of the hopes I have for you; but those hopes apply to all ages, including mine. And I will try to be brief and to the point as I mention a couple.

Follow Your Passion.

My first hope is that you will follow your passion in life. It's the same advice I give to my own children. And I emphasize, *your passion* . . . not somebody else's view for you. Find and do what you love in life. Now it is possible that you have found your passion, your career path right here within the last year or two. If so, good for you. But others of you may still be searching for that passion; that was certainly my story when I graduated from Wesleyan.

But my advice to you is do what you love . . . what really turns your crank . . . and do it with excellence. Try those first jobs, first opportunities, see what you like to do, what you are naturally good at. But don't be afraid to make mistakes, to change in mid-course. I did: After graduate school, I went from being a probation officer, to a practicing trial lawyer, to a state Supreme Court judge, to a federal trial judge . . . and I loved every one of those career opportunities. But my story is not unique (the same as many on the platform or others in the audience)--each one of those changes came with a fair amount of risk. However, if you "do what you love" in life, it will never be just a job. It will be a profession, and the reward will

be providing valuable service to others. Money will soon become, and should be, a very secondary concern.

Service to Others.

Next, let me talk about service for a minute. You are about the graduate from one of the finest colleges in the Midwest. And you are about to enter many different honorable professions and career paths. Consider it a privilege to serve others. And I know I am preaching to the choir here. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a graduating class that just led a campus to meet a challenge of over 12,500 service hours in this community. That is impressive (audience applause) . . it does not end here, but it just begins here. With this college degree comes a responsibility to serve others in the community. From what I have seen, you **will be** leaders in your communities. But that responsibility to serve should be embraced, not seen as a burden.

I call it the *real prize* of this degree. And I urge you to keep your eye on the real prize. As I get older, I end up going to a lot of funerals, or retirement parties (that happens at this age . .). And nobody says: Boy, old Joe wishes he could have worked another 20 or 30 hours per week, or Joe would have been a “real success” had he landed three more big clients. No, inevitably what I hear is what Joe did for his community, what he did for his neighbors or friends or family. Always . . . it never fails. And there is a lesson in there. My encouragement is to embrace this lesson of *service to others* sooner, rather than later in life.

No matter what you do with your degree, there will be opportunities *and needs* for service to the greater good. Every day, I see graduates of this institution providing legal services to the underserved, medical services to the needy, teachers tutoring students and heading extracurricular activities on their own time, pastors ministering at all hours to their flock. We see our own graduates as state legislators battling to expand medical services on an equitable basis, we see a 6 foot 10 inch University College graduate lead our local food bank, multiple graduates are literally leaders of our nonprofit boards throughout the community . *I could go on and on.*

Graduates, the **real prize** of this degree is service to others. Embrace it.

Do the Right Thing, No Matter What.

Finally, my last hope for you is this: Do the right thing, no matter what. And bear with me for a moment on this one--this counsel is based on real world experience and the school of hard knocks. It may sound trite, but again, it will happen very soon in your careers . . . no matter how you use this degree. You will be called upon by a client, a coworker, sometimes a boss to shade a deal, to turn a corner a little fast . . . just don't do it.

One of my first employers in the legal profession, up in Norfolk, pulled me aside 32 years ago and said, "Gerrard, it takes 25 years to build a reputation and only 5 minutes to destroy it." (If you fudge on your word--that reputation will

stick.) It is one of the best pieces of advice I ever received. And it guided many decisions in tough circumstances.

You are probably thinking, “Naw, those circumstances won’t happen to me.” Let me assure you, they will. More often than you wish. A client will ask you to backdate a document, a coworker or boss may ask you to fudge on a bill or fudge on a report [just a bit (and only this one time)]. I could go on and on. Most of you will be entering professions or vocations that contain a Code of Conduct—that’s not what I’m talking about. The Codes of Conduct are down here (gesture). It’s the lowest common denominator . . . I am asking for a higher bar in your lives. I am asking you to remember what you were taught at home and what you learned here, at this institution. You have “learned to do the right thing *because it is* the right thing (and the ethical thing) to do.” And you have thought about it. That is the intrinsic value of a liberal arts education! The ethics, and the critical thinking skills, and the judgment, have been exercised and integrated into your curriculum. And that is what you will take with you in life, far more or at least equal to the substantive knowledge.

You be the difference, just say no to those “fudging,” “grey” circumstances; you’ll know them and you will never regret it.

And I would add one short caveat to that first lawyer’s advice. A “reputation” is what others see, and what they think about you. Character (and integrity) is what you do, when no one else is looking. The Codes of Conduct tell

you what to do when “everyone else is looking.” Your character, and what you learned here, will tell you what to do when no one else is looking. And then someday, someone will be standing at your retirement party talking about character, integrity, and service. That is my *greatest hope* for you!

Closing.

I am very proud to congratulate you today; and to welcome you as a fellow graduate of Nebraska Wesleyan University . . . and I look forward to seeing some of you practicing law in my courtroom (someday) and many others as leaders in this community and communities throughout this country. I wish you well today, enjoy it--you deserve it. And I wish you and your families much success in the future. Now let’s get on with what we came here for . . . Dr. Ohles, the floor is yours. Thank you.