



Federal Trade Commission

MEADVILLE AREA SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

Deborah Platt Majoras
Chairman, Federal Trade Commission
Friday, June 9, 2006

Thank you.

Assistant Superintendent Heller, distinguished Board members, Mr. Morgan, distinguished faculty, members of the Meadville Area Senior High School Class of 2006, and beloved families and friends:

It is a privilege to address you on this evening charged with pride and possibility and opportunity. Tonight we celebrate an important achievement, and I congratulate each graduate. What makes commencement so special, though, is that it is forward-looking, as you stand at the beginning of your adult lives. It was 25 years ago that I sat where you sit tonight, and my family sat where your family sits tonight. When Mr. Morgan asked me if I would come and speak to you, I was very excited. But as this day approached, I began to feel nervous about it. Despite the fact that I speak to large audiences almost every week, I was apprehensive about this speech. A lot, after all, has changed in 25 years.

When I was here, we danced to disco on the radio and on records played on large record players, and thought our world was complete when Sony introduced the Walkman, the first portable stereo, and MTV first entered the cable world with around-the-clock videos. You carry tiny i-pods, swap music over the Internet (only legally, I hope!), and MTV no longer even shows videos. We passed notes at school and tied up our parents' telephone lines when we were at home; we didn't even have call waiting! There was no Internet, no e-mail, no playstation or

gameboy; we played Pac Man and thought it was cool. You carry cell phones, instant message one another, and play computer games with one another without even being in the same house. We feared or despised the Soviet Union but knew nothing of terrorism. Today, the Soviet Union no longer exists and, tragically, yours is the first generation in our country to come of age with an understanding of the devastation of terrorism. Back when I was here, the Pittsburgh Steelers dominated, and today . . . ok, ok, I am a Cleveland Browns fan, so don't make me say it!

Our world has undergone enormous change in the past quarter century. Yet, my friends, as I stand with you today, we share an enormous bond. Why is that? It is because we are anchored together by the same roots – here in Meadville, as Bulldogs, and more broadly, as Americans.

Have you ever watched professional baseball players in spring training or even just warming up for the game? What is striking about their routines is that they run through the same drills that every baseball player learned in little league. Similarly, even advanced musicians sing or play scales and simple melodies to warm up. Why is that? It is because to be really good at something, you have to make sure that you first learn and then continually practice the fundamentals. They form a base, and everyone who plays the game must remain anchored to their base – stray from it too far, and you can't hit the ball or field routine grounders, and you sing off-key.

Our base – yours and mine – was formed here in Meadville, Pennsylvania. It is a community where we all have learned our fundamentals for life. It is these fundamentals that you will take with you whether you leave this community or stay, and it is these fundamentals

that put us on a level playing field with all other Americans as we leave the safety of our family homes and begin our adult lives.

The first of the fundamentals is diligence, hard work. I know you knew that was coming; there is simply no way around it. I have worked and continue to work with people who are smarter than me or who have skills that I do not have. But I have never let anyone out-work me. In the end, anyone you work for or with wants someone they can always count on. Be that person, and you will stand out.

Hard work, though, does not mean just mindlessly putting in hours so the boss sees you there. It means putting your all into everything you do: in your work, making a sale or arguing a case in court, or even in making a sandwich, shoveling the driveway, or picking out a gift for a friend who has been ill. But, you might ask, isn't the purpose of some jobs just to collect a paycheck on your way to doing something else that's more important? And just because I cut corners shoveling the driveway, that doesn't mean I will cut corners at my job, right? Wrong. Excellence and a strong work ethic grow as we practice them – and so does mediocrity. While you don't know what you will be doing with your life years from now, I know that you would not tell me today, "I believe I was put on this earth to be mediocre." And besides, you never know who may be watching. I once read the story of a boy named Colin, who grew up in the Bronx in the 1950's, where it was not easy to find a summer job. But he needed money, so he went to the Teamsters Hall every morning to get whatever jobs he could. He was the only kid who volunteered to clean up sticky syrup at a Pepsi plant. He did such a good job that he was invited back the next year to run a bottling machine. Years later, Colin, Colin Powell that is, would become the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and then Secretary of State, and he

would offer these words: “All work is honorable. Always do your best because someone is watching.”¹ Some day, somewhere, you will impress someone who wants to give you a job or help you in some way, when you least expect it.

I arrived for my first stint in Washington right after I graduated from college in 1985. I had no job, only enough money on me to live for about a month, and no contacts. But I had my new diploma, so I figured, “no problem.” Wrong. I was one of many new college students in D.C., all looking for plum jobs, and suddenly, I would have traded my good grades for the ability to type. I took a job as a receptionist in a law firm. Because I was considering applying to law schools, I thought meeting some lawyers would be a good thing. Now, I could have approached this job with disdain or made it clear that this was not what I wanted to be doing. But that attitude would have been contrary to what I had been taught. Thankfully, I approached the job by trying to be a great receptionist and adding value to the law practice. Lawyers at the firm took notice, and soon I was working as a paralegal for a prominent partner at the firm, who then wrote me letters of recommendation for law school.

The great President Theodore Roosevelt, who cited “courage, honor, justice, truth, sincerity, and hardihood [as] the virtues that made America” went on to warn that “the things that will destroy America are prosperity-at-any-price . . . the love of soft living and the get-rich-quick theory of life.”² But if we stick to the fundamentals, we will not let that happen.

¹Mark Sanborn, *The Fred Factor* 23 (2004).

²Jon M. Huntsman, *Winners Never Cheat. Everyday Values We Learned as Children (But May Have Forgotten)* 31 (2005).

Our second fundamental is personal responsibility. It has become so easy for us to find someone else to blame for anything that goes wrong. Anyone can file a lawsuit for just about anything these days, and everyone gets frustrated when policymakers in Washington or Harrisburg seem to just point fingers at each other. The authors of the book *Responsible Managers Get Results* offer the troubling assessment that “[w]e now have an entire generation that has been acculturated to avoid responsibility. The individual corollary is ‘I don’t have to worry about the consequences of not performing as long as I have something or someone else to blame it on.’”³

Do you want to be a part of that generation? I don’t. I have yet to see a “blamer” – someone who fails to stand up and take responsibility – who is truly successful or satisfied. This is because blaming, while easy, is contrary to who we are as Americans. It runs contrary to our fundamentals. As author Philip Howard put it in his book *The Death of Common Sense*, “taking responsibility was, of course, the basic premise of the republic.”⁴ And in a recently published book, *America Against The World*, the authors reported that in a survey of 44 nations, the United States was among the top in believing that those who fail have themselves, not society, to blame.⁵ These authors describe us as “a people who are more personally freewheeling, self-reliant, and adverse to government involvement” than peoples of most other nations. This tells me that taking responsibility is still fundamentally engrained in our culture and in our beings.

³Gerald W. Faust, Richard Lyles, Will Phillips, *Responsible Managers Get Results*, Published by American Management Association (April 1, 1998).

⁴Phillip K. Howard, *The Death of Common Sense* 18-19 (1996).

⁵Andrew Kohut, *America Against the World* 54-56 (2006).

When you stand up and take responsibility, you will show yourself as a leader and as one who deserves respect. The sports editor and humorist Lewis Grizzard said, “I believe life is a series of near misses. A lot of what we ascribe to luck is not luck at all. It’s seizing the day and accepting responsibility for your future. It’s seeing what other people don’t see and pursuing that vision.”⁶

Our third fundamental is developing and maintaining a positive, “can-do” attitude that can withstand disappointments. Now doesn’t that sound hokey? Make you want to roll your eyes? Trust me: Having a positive attitude, alone, will not get you what you want; but I have never seen anyone get what they want without having a positive attitude. And this, too, is consistent with who we are as Americans. We are a vastly optimistic people, always looking ahead, always believing that things will get better for each generation.⁷

When Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice grew up in segregated Birmingham, Alabama in the 1950's, her parents taught her to believe that despite the discrimination of that era, she could be President of the United States some day. In a biography about her life, it is reported that she stood outside the gates of the White House at the age of 10 and said, “Daddy, I’m barred out of there now because of the color of my skin. But one day, I’ll be in that house.”⁸ And so she has been. And if you look at race car driver Danica Patrick, who races against men (some of whom do not want her there), or professional golfer Michelle Wie, who went head-to-head with

⁶Leslie Pockell and Adrienne Avila, *Everything I’ve Learned: 100 Great Principles To Live By* 34 (2004).

⁷*Id.* at 11-13.

⁸Antonia Felix, *Condi: The Condoleeza Rice Story* 2 (2002).

the best male golfers in the world at the age of 15, you see that their positive attitudes and ability to shrug off the barriers and the naysayers has made all the difference.

As you weave your way down your life's path, your positive attitude will be challenged, because there will be disappointments. Count on it. While it is easy for you to see what the adults you admire have achieved – it is our achievements that go on the official resume – you do not see the disappointments. But they are always there. It is not true that successful people do not suffer failures; but it is true that they do not allow those failures to bring them to a screeching halt. A few years ago, when I was at the Justice Department, my boss left to take another job, and I wanted to be promoted to his job. Many people, including me, thought that I would be. But a good friend and colleague got the job instead. I was highly disappointed, and I felt humiliated. Many people told me that I should be so angry that I should leave my job in protest; I deserved that job, after all! After taking a deep breath and having a talk with myself, I realized that doing that would accomplish nothing. I loved my job, and I felt loyal to those who had put me in it. So, I stayed, continued to work hard, and had another highly rewarding year at the Justice Department. And remember what I said about how someone is always watching? When the position of FTC Chairman opened up the next year, those to whom I had shown loyalty remembered.

If you are never disappointed, then it probably means that you are not trying hard enough. Exercising good judgment about what actions you decide to undertake is smart. But deciding to take no actions because you fear failure is tragic. When I was a child, I was afraid to try new things, so my Dad forbid me from using the two words, “I can't.” I would cry as he tried to get me to ride the bike (he did not believe in training wheels), and say “I can't,” and he would

say, “Deborah, what’s ‘a can’t’? ‘A can’t’ never did anything! Now do it.” To this day, I cringe if I hear myself say those two forbidden words. Then in college, I had a professor who worried that, because I was so determined to get straight A’s, I was not releasing my creative side and taking some chances. So, she asked me to take a Latin American literature class on a pass-fail basis; that way, I could just relax, enjoy it, and take some chances. So, I did, and not only did it turn out to be one of my most rewarding college courses, it reinforced the lesson about the importance sometimes of stepping off the cautious path.

Our fourth fundamental is connecting with other individuals. There are times when our society of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility may seem to value and reward only the cutthroat. It’s not true. Treating others with respect and caring is the American way and an important fundamental for a successful, fulfilling life. I agree with Dean Koontz, who rose from poverty to become a best-selling novelist today, when he said, “Some people think only intellect counts: knowing how to solve problems, knowing how to get by, knowing how to identify an advantage and seize it. But the functions of intellect are insufficient without courage, love, friendship, compassion, and empathy.”⁹

You only have so many hours to work or play; you can only be in one place at a time; and your body will sometimes fail you, especially as you get older. But, as I learned by watching my mother, your capacity to care and to connect is unlimited. And it is these connections, above any individual achievement that will enrich your life. Treat people with respect and say “please” and “thank you.” When someone at the FTC has done a particularly great job on something, I try to send a quick e-mail of praise and thanks. Not long ago, I sent

⁹Pockell, *supra* note 6, at 116.

such an e-mail to a woman who had assisted me on a project. She wrote back to thank me for thanking her! She said that it meant so much to her to hear from me personally that, there she was in her 30's, sending it to her mother to see. The point is that the e-mail took me two minutes. But it infused this young lawyer with pride and confidence. I remember her note every time I think I do not have time to reach out to say “thanks” or “how are you,” and that inspires one to reach out.

Even outside of the work context, you never know how powerful a kind word or a call out-of-the-blue will mean to someone. I have had some tough days – days when I thought “I just can’t do this anymore,” only to have the phone ring and hear the voice of an old friend saying, “I just wanted to see how you were doing.” The five-minute phone call can change the entire course of the day. And there is no need to limit connections to just those we already know. I have had days when I have learned more in a five-minute chat with a cab driver than in a two-hour meeting at the office. The point is that every day, you have choices: Ignore the pained look on your colleague’s face or pull him aside and ask if he is o.k. Scream at the secretary who is apologizing for making a mistake or accept the apology with grace and understanding. Snap at the waiter who has brought the wrong entree or assure him cheerfully that it’s o.k. and that you, too, get things mixed up sometimes.

Teamwork, too, is critical; there may be nothing more powerful. That may be why I love sports so much, because watching a team work together in a tough-fought competition is stimulating and inspiring. And it teaches us a lot about teams in our own lives. When the Los Angeles Lakers began the 2003-2004 season, they were expected to win a championship. Not only did they have Shaquille O’Neal and Kobe Bryant, but they had acquired veteran superstars,

Gary “The Glove” Payton and Karl “The Mailman” Malone, both of whom were so certain that the Lakers would go all the way that they took less money so that they could play on the team. Do you remember what happened? They lost to the Detroit Pistons 4 - 1 in the championship. Why? Because they forgot to play like a team. In his book about that season, Coach Phil Jackson tells us that “selfless concepts” are “required to produce success.”¹⁰ “Only in achieving that degree of oneness,” he said, “can a group of men truly make the necessary sacrifice to win a championship.”¹¹

You will have the opportunity to be part of teams your entire life: on projects at college, in your job, in community work, or at church. There really is nothing more satisfying than the feeling of accomplishing something in a group that has worked hard together and supported one another. And I will bet if you ask anyone whom you believe is successful to talk about how they achieved their success, they will tell you about all of their teammates who helped them get there.

Finally, above all else, remain true to your principles. In his recent book, *Winners Never Cheat*, Jon Huntsman, Chairman and Founder of Huntsman Corporation, said, “Cutting ethical corners is the antithesis of the American Dream. Each dreamer is provided with an opportunity to participate on a playing field made level by fairness, honor, and integrity.”¹² He went on to say, “Be tough, be competitive, give the game all you have – but do it fairly.”

Remaining true to principles is not easy. As you proceed through your life, you will hear, unfortunately, of those like the Enron executives whose story was one of greed and

¹⁰Phil Jackson, *The Last Season, A Team In Search Of Its Soul* 250-251 (2004).

¹¹*Id.* at 251.

¹²Huntsman, *supra* note 2, at 5.

ambition run out of control or of politicians who have mocked the people's faith in democracy by taking bribes, or of union leaders who have stolen the money entrusted them by their hard-working members. This may make it harder for you to maintain your own high standard; after all, if everyone else is acting this way, why not join them? I urge you not to fall into that trap. Listen to that voice inside of you that knows right from wrong. Fortunately, *everyone* is not behaving badly, not by a long shot. That is not the American way.

As long as we, the American people, continue to create in our own lives a culture of integrity and values and trust, and then stand up for that culture and show our outrage when the culture is weakened by a few bad actors, we will ensure that our principles will continue to guide us and our nation. Recognizing that acting with integrity and accountability is not always easy, however, it is important to remain humble and recognize, too, that all people, no matter how good, have the capacity to stray. This does not mean we excuse it; it means we have to work hard to prevent ourselves and others from sliding. I think it is highly unlikely that the high-profile executives and politicians who broke the law were simply bad people who, when they took their jobs said, "This is great. Now I can fulfill my dream of defrauding shareholders or the taxpayers." I think that, instead, they were talented and ambitious individuals who, over time compromised a little, justified it, shifted blame, looked the other way, and played dumb. In fact, in a *Wall Street Journal* story that recounted the fall of a former Worldcom executive, the writer confirmed, "In an illustration of how huge ethical lapses often begin with small steps, he justified his actions to himself, thinking Worldcom's business would soon improve"¹³

¹³Susan Pulliam, *Crossing the Line, At Center of Fraud, WorldCom Official Sees Life Unravel*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, Mar. 24, 2005, at A-1.

Understanding this, we recognize while remaining true to principles is not always easy, it is essential that we do it all of the time, even when it seems that not much is at stake.

I hope you were able to recognize something of yourself and your life to this point in my discussion of fundamentals. I also hope that you can take something from what I did *not* include as part of the fundamentals, that is, it is not fundamentally necessary to have wealth or acquaintance with influential people as you go down your path. You do not need those. “Life consists not in holding good cards, but in playing well those you hold.”¹⁴

Friends, I have traveled this great country of ours and to other parts of the world. I say to you with great confidence that those who forget their roots and cease practicing their fundamentals are those who fail in the quest for a fulfilling life. Mr. Morgan told me that many of you wanted to know how I got from here to where I am today. I tell you this: I am there not *despite* the fact that I was raised in Meadville; I am there *because* I was raised in Meadville. Here is where I learned, developed, and practiced a set of fundamentals that I cling to, especially when my swing seems a little off or my melodies a little off key and by all means when others try to lead me down a different path. The secret is there is no secret. Like Dorothy in Oz with her ruby slippers, you have the power and the tools right here (gesture to all in audience) and right here (fist on heart).

You do not need to be in Washington to make a difference. The greatness of our nation was not built in Washington, and it will not be maintained in Washington. It will be maintained right here in Meadville and in this high school, and it will be maintained in the towns and the

¹⁴Pockell, *supra* note 6, at 69 (quotation by Josh Billings).

cities throughout the country. Whether you make your life here in this wonderful community or travel elsewhere, I wish you every happiness and success in whatever you choose.