

# **NORTHERN ESSEX COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

**57<sup>th</sup> Commencement**

**May 18, 2019**

Thank you, President Glenn, and congratulations to you, the Northern Essex Community College Class of 2019!

Congratulations as well to your families, friends, and other supporters, as well as the College's faculty, administration and Board of Trustees, who all played a vital role in making this celebration possible.

As someone who started my career as a teller and a bank janitor, I'm truly honored – and indeed quite surprised - to be here today. I am also extremely humbled to be asked to do this.

Unlike the typical event speeches that so many of us are asked, or will be asked, to give as part of our professional lives, delivering a commencement address is a truly special opportunity and, frankly, a daunting responsibility.

After all, it is not often that you get the chance to play a role, albeit a very small one, in one of the most memorable moments for so many people.

Like the day of your wedding, the birth of your children, or the death of a loved one, graduations – whether they be from high school or college – are those by which we so often come to mark time in our lives as we think back upon the years that pass since that special day.

On such a landmark occasion, one often reflects upon what got you to this point, especially the many people in our lives who made this moment possible.

For me, this list begins at home with my parents.

My Dad, who coached my team in every sport I ever played and when put me on skates at age 4, learned to skate himself at the same time. And who insisted that I apply for a summer teller position 37 years ago, instead of packing groceries with my friends from high school, which was is what I preferred to do.

My Mom, who instilled the importance of education, discipline, and hard work, as well as a growing sense of the importance of equal access and opportunity for all.

My mother grew up in Dorchester and when you ask her on what street, she will tell you it depends – depends upon what year.

Because as the daughter of working class parents, they were regularly priced out by increases in their rent that forced them to move on a regular basis.

63 years ago my mother graduated at the top of her high school class and at that school the valedictorian traditionally received a full 4-year scholarship to college.

As someone who grew up very poor, this financial award was a life-changer and put in reach a degree that was otherwise a distant dream.

However, there was a catch. Her high school had never before had a female valedictorian and decided that such an investment in a young woman was not worthwhile. So, instead they gave it to the person ranked second in her class, a young man.

Thankfully, her mother - my grandmother - was a force to be reckoned with and ultimately the school relented and provided my mother with a full scholarship as well.

Four years later, my mother became the first in her family to graduate college and went on to a masters degree while teaching young people in Dorchester for over 30 years.

Later in my life, it was ex-wife who, when she decided to express her true sexual identity, was rejected by those closest to her.

In college, it was Professor Bill Burke at Stonehill, whose philosophy of aiming high, for the seemingly unreachable, became one of my own guiding principles. Because of an assignment he gave in my senior year, I set a goal to be the President of the largest bank based in Boston by the time I was 40, a frankly outrageous ambition that I certainly never thought possible as lower middle class kid, but that I nonetheless achieved at the age of 42.

As it turns out, age 42 was coincidentally profound for me, particularly with respect to influences I never met.

Like Ben Franklin – yes, the very famous forefather of our country - who at age 42, decided that his life was half over and sold his printing businesses to become the statesman, diplomat, and inventor for which he is better known today. As it turns out, he was exactly right – he died at age 84.

And it was the age at which the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy, for whom I am named, was assassinated following his victory in the

Democratic presidential primary in California in 1968.

Taking a cue from both of them, I decided to leverage my position and resources at Eastern to advance change and justice as they did.

Although initially a person of very limited financial resources, I came to understand how truly privileged I nonetheless was as a straight white male.

Through many friendships and associations with those not of my own experience, I have come to more deeply and personally understand continued conditions that impede equal rights

and opportunity in our society, and in the workplace.

As a person now of relative privilege in almost every way, I have come to recognize that I have an opportunity and indeed a responsibility to help drive necessary change and progress that has taken far too long to achieve.

When I look out at all of you, I see our region's present and more vibrant future.

What I don't see is the same picture among the corporate boards and C-suites of Greater Boston – and that will compromise our region's future if we don't all do something about it.

I am proud to say that Eastern's Board and our most senior management team, is today 50% women, people of color, and others whom are considered "diverse", such as those of the LGBTQ community.

However, when you look at the boards and top management of most other private companies in Massachusetts, less than 20% are comprised of women and less than half that percentage are considered diverse – as compared with about two-thirds of the state's population.

That means that straight white men make up three quarters of the leadership of our business community even though those that look like me

comprise only about half that – just one-third – of the Commonwealth's residents.

That's right, over-representation by 2 to 1, whereas everyone else – all women, all people of color, all those of the LGBTQ community – are under-represented by half.

Given this, is it any wonder that pay inequity, discriminatory workplace practices and culture, and the widening wealth gap - highly correlated along gender and racial lines - are among the most troubling issues we are facing today?

Thankfully, business leaders are increasingly recognizing that greater diversity at the highest levels is not only a moral imperative, but an economic one.

They are beginning to better understand that developing a more robust, collective mindset, made so by those with different experiences and perspectives, is becoming more critical as they are faced with more complex challenges than ever before, in a more rapidly changing world.

Today's leaders are increasingly embracing the idea that greater social and economic justice is not only "right", but "smart" - that their personal and their company's reputation and brand, their

ability to attract the best talent, the performance of their business, and the strength of our community and our economy - indeed, their very relevance and survival - depend upon it.

It is a recognition that diversity and inclusion, and engendering a true sense of belonging in one's organization, is not about aesthetics, not about window dressing, not about marketing images, but about developing the best strategic thinking towards achieving long-term term success.

However, despite these powerful forces of self-interest – so necessary for change to be truly sustainable - the impetus and instrument for such change will come from all of us here today.

Herein lies your opportunity and your responsibility, for each of you to do what you can, to be that “tiny ripple of hope” that Robert Kennedy so famously spoke of.

We must see the world as it is and not ask 'Why?', but instead see the world as it could be and ask, 'Why not?'”.

This is the very same question I began to ask myself when I looked around at those in my position in business and saw only people who looked like me looking back.

We all must show up, stand up, speak up, provide insight, and take meaningful, constructive, and intentional action to exercise the moral courage to engage others in this pursuit.

In short, you must “aim high”, not only in your chosen field, but in your ideals, in your beliefs, and in your expectations of others and our society. And if you happen to fall short, know that you – and our community and our country – will be so much further ahead, so much better, than if you had settled for what others might consider more reasonable expectations.

Given all that you've accomplished, through your perseverance and drive and sacrifice to be here today - among the most memorable of all of your days – I know you are better equipped than most to undertake this challenge.

With that in mind, I wish you the very best for continued success and once again offer my most hearty congratulations on all that you have achieved.

Thank you.