

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS MAY 2018 NORTHERN ESSEX COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Good afternoon -- buenas tardes! Thank you, President Glenn. Members of the board of trustees, faculty, staff, family, and of course – the class of 2018! It is an absolute honor to share this day with you. My grandmother has a saying “dime con quien anda y te dire quien eres” which means tell me who you’re hanging out with and I’ll tell you who you really are. I feel incredibly lucky to be hanging out with the thousands of proud students, faculty and family here today.

Northern Essex plays such a vital role for the Merrimack Valley and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This college is more than a traditional higher education institution, it is a treasure and creator of community and opportunity. Whether you’re a recent high school graduate, a young professional passionate about the arts and education (like my cousin Abe who’s graduating today), or a professional with decades of experience looking to add to their academic portfolio, or a recent immigrant determined to learn English like my father was -- Northern Essex has your back.

My dad had an amazing professor who had his back. Her name was Jane Thiefels. With patience, persistence and gentle encouragement, Jane taught my father English, which was key in ensuring he could apply to a higher wage job and put food on the table for our family. No matter your background, age, or socioeconomic status – Northern Essex opens its doors. And that’s why I feel so privileged to address this distinguished crowd today.

Many of you have overcome numerous obstacles to get here -- working two or three jobs, taking extra shifts, raising a child, staying up late studying for finals and in some cases even overcoming trauma. The resiliency of this college and our community are well represented here today.

Chris Montes of Haverhill is here today with his family. Chris enrolled in Northern Essex shortly after high school in 2010, but his first couple semesters didn’t go so well. He was going through some personal challenges and his mother was diagnosed with cancer. He ended up dropping out and taking a job in a local warehouse. Despite facing adversity, Chris came back to Northern Essex with determination, tenacity and purpose. He has earned straight As ever since. He’s done this while working full-time for New Balance, maintaining their security cameras for properties across the globe. Today, Chris graduates with honors in Business and he’s joined here by his mother Kathleen and siblings. Chris is driven by a passion for finance and hopes to help low income individuals and families to be successful with their personal finances. Resilience, Purpose, and the desire to Serve – Chris represents the values that are within each of the graduates of this class.

There are so many motivating stories in this class – Sabrina Hamel dropped out of Methuen High and she described herself as a “*hot disaster*,” but today she’s graduating

with *high honors* in respiratory therapy and already has a job lined up at the prestigious Boston's Children's Hospital.

Wendy Ramirez of Methuen is a native of El Salvador who came to the U.S. when she was just five years old. She was raised by a single mom who worked two jobs. Wendy and her husband have two boys -- 3 and 5 years old, she volunteers at Opportunity Works and Habitat for Humanity. Today she is graduating with a near perfect GPA with a degree in early childhood education. Being on the frontlines, early childhood educators-- people like Wendy-- quite literally hold the future in their hands.

And to highlight how broad Northern Essex's impact reaches, consider Linda Goddu who has nearly two dozen years of business experience, primarily in supervisor roles, but found that her lack of a college degree made the job market tough. Linda graduates today with a business management degree.

We could go on and on highlighting so many amazing inspirations held within this graduating class, but I'll have to stop there because if not we'll be here till next week.

I'm sure you're all sitting here, wondering what qualifies me, a 24 year old who is still figuring it all out, to give advice to this incredible class of graduates? I'm not so sure myself. But I've picked up a couple things during my past few years in public service, and maybe they'll be helpful to your journey beyond graduation.

First, don't be afraid to look stupid. Anyone who accomplished anything looked stupid at least 15 times before getting there. When I ran for City Council I was 21 and people thought I was crazy -- and I was. The fact is that I wouldn't be a State Representative today if I wasn't willing to look stupid. You've got to be willing to take risks, stick your neck out, step outside your comfort zone and learn how to handle disappointment or failure. As a kid, I used to take baseball really seriously and I would get upset whenever we lost a game. After a loss, my dad would always say "Tu no perdiste, ganaste -- ganaste experiencia" -- which means "No you didn't lose, you won -- you won experience." I quickly learned that out of failure comes wisdom and poise.

Second-- there are two factors that can make or break any personal or professional endeavor. Egos and empathy. We all have egos and can exhibit more empathy. Big egos build walls and empathy moves mountains and invites understanding. In any industry, you'll find people with giant personalities and small ideas. In politics, as you can imagine, we come across a couple of these personalities. What I've found is that the more I can check my ego -- my pride, my privilege -- the more effective of a leader and follower I can be. Empathy in many ways is tougher. Empathy asks you to put aside all your assumptions and societal norms -- to instead see the humanity in every person. Sometimes empathy comes in the form of understanding that you cannot understand another person's challenges or reality, but you still see, feel, and recognize their existence.

Finally, revisit your purpose. Life gets crazy and it is important to keep your main mission in mind. As author Stephen Covey said, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” [repeat] With all the stress of rent, putting food on the table, a mortgage, raising kids or other priorities, it’s easy to lose sight of your mission. It can lead us down a dark path. Checking in with your purpose from time to time is a healthy exercise. Every now and then when I wake up early to do work or stay up late, I contemplate over why I decided to be a public servant. I revisit my purpose. And when I do, I find strength, clarity and focus. So, whenever life gets crazy, pause and ask yourself “what is my purpose? What is my mission? What am I actually doing?” Take this with the understanding that purpose is a decision, not a title.

There is much to be proud of in this class and each and every one of you has a personal narrative, a story, and a purpose that can empower those around you. No matter the major, your impact will be major, and your responsibility to improve our community is not minor.

This class consists of a great deal healthcare majors that will go on to heal and provide helping hands to an industry and a society that is in great need of your vocation. We also have those graduating with degrees in criminal justice, business, liberal arts, engineering, computer sciences and early childhood education.

You are all essential to the fabric of our community, the vitality of our economy, and the advancement of our society.

When I was preparing to graduate college a few years ago, I had this sort of come-to-Jesus moment about my future. I was interning at the White House for President Obama (they were crazy enough to take a random kid from Haverhill). Right before graduation, the President had an intimate conversation with his interns. One of my peers decided to ask him the existential question that’s on the minds of many graduates – “Mr. President, what’s the key to living a fulfilling life?” The President paused, leaned in, and said “Look, let me be clear – the key to living a fulfilling life is don’t think about who you want to *be*, but rather what you want to *do*.” By that he meant that ever since we were *this tall* we were asked, “What do you want to *be* when you grow up?” And it’s usually a conversation about the position – “do you want to be a lawyer, a doctor, a CEO, an engineer, a Congresswoman?” – but it should really be a conversation about verbs – what do you want to *do*? Are you the CEO that pays a living wage and creates opportunity? The scientist that cures cancer? The lawyer that fights for working people? For example, in Congress – we have some individuals that woke up one day and said “I want to be a Congressman.” And, that was it – no reason or understanding of what they wanted to do with the position. So, naturally his or her entire existence surrounds itself around the preservation of that title, instead of doing some good with it. In some sad cases like this, we have successful individuals that thought about what they wanted to *be*, without thinking about what they wanted to *do*.

Reflecting on the President’s words, I went home that night thinking about what I wanted to *do*, especially since graduation was less than two weeks away. Up until then I

had my mind set on moving to a big city for work – DC, Boston, New York, Chicago, -- because that's what young people do right? That's where all the hype and good work is happening? Nah. I quickly realized that I was just going through the motions and accepting what society expects us to do. There was no meaning there. My thoughts about moving to a big city were more about who I wanted to *be* versus what I wanted to *do*.

Later that night when I checked my Facebook, I saw that teachers in Haverhill were organizing a demonstration because they had some of the lowest salaries for teachers statewide. I saw that a friend had written a long post about a loved one they lost to the opioid epidemic. I did some digging and found that Haverhill was 6th in the state for overdose deaths. And, I thought about the challenges and privileges of growing up here. I dug some more and looked up the demographics and socioeconomic status of my hometown. I noticed that despite having 20-25% of the population being Latino, that wasn't reflected anywhere in city leadership – elected or not. I also didn't see many young faces. All these issues, combined, were things that I wanted to address, work on– actually *do*. So, instead of leaving Haverhill, I decided to stay and came up with the crazy idea of running for City Council and more recently State Rep.

Therefore, the question today is not what title you will achieve with this degree, what salary you'll receive with this degree, or what office you'll work in with this degree, but rather what will you *do* with this degree and the responsibility that comes with it.

For each graduating class, for each generation – the times for which they live in often dictate the calls to action and responsibilities required. Whether it was the civil war, woman's suffrage, or civil rights, those with the privilege of a degree have been and are called to be instruments of change. This class graduates into what may seem like a turbulent time in America. We live in a time of profound social challenges, cynicism in our politics, and even skepticism in one another. We live in a time where some choose to ignore the dark parts of our nation's past, without pause or concern to heed the lessons of history. A time where the very definition of American is being tested. We are asking honest questions about our culture, our responsibility to one another, all while our democratic institutions face the ultimate tests.

While some may see this era as unprecedented and daunting, this climate has offered us an opportunity, a renewed wave of civic engagement and service. Our job now is to channel that wave into outcomes that make life a little bit more fair, just, and compassionate. People are engaged, mobilized, and ready to lend their time to the issue that frustrates them most. Today, people of all walks of life find themselves with a renewed sense of civic spirit that has translated into action across all sectors. A New America is manifested in every part of our lives:

In the workplace where women are saying #TimesUp & #MeToo.

In high schools where students are saying enough is enough to gun violence, seeking bipartisan solutions.

And in the continued struggle to establish that Black Lives Matter, too.

You don't have to go far to see this civic spirit. You do not have to be a politician or a "political person" to implement change. In fact, it is most often the opposite. Politicians and formal institutions are rarely on the frontlines of transformational change. Transformational change arrives when everyday people, working people, students, young people, elders say that we are not satisfied with the treatment of my fellow worker, teacher, friend or stranger -- and that it's time for us to aspire and achieve more for each other.

While there are some who profit from divisiveness and lead us to think that we are more divided than we are -- we're not. Society has labels and in some cases they're important, but they're not comprehensive -- they don't tell the full story of who we are as individuals. You can be a conservative who loves the environment and believes in marriage equality and you can be a liberal who upholds fiscal responsibility and building strong families. Don't let society tell you otherwise.

As we strive to create a better world-- chase the truth incessantly, listen with empathy, and act courageously in service to others.

My dad often writes poems and thoughts that he would share as I grew up. One that always stuck with me was "If you dedicate yourself to serving the less fortunate, you will have felt your existence, and you will always have reasons to live."

At the end of the day, we're living on this planet for a short amount of time. Live it with love, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to your purpose.

And as we close here today, let us consider the words of civil rights leader Howard Thurman as guidance in our next steps --- "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." So class of 2018, what makes you come alive?