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Commencement Address

Michael A. Mason
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Michael A. Mason
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Illinois Wesleyan University
Commencement Address
April 30, 2006

"Seize the Chance to Dance"

President Wilson, Mrs. Wilson, honored guests, family and friends and most of all the graduating class of 2006, you have no idea what an honor it is for me to be here to make a few comments for you during this very special day, this very special moment in your lives.

Over the past three or four years, I have given a number of graduation speeches, most have been to law enforcement agencies, like the Sacramento County Sheriff's Office and the United States Secret Service. I worried a lot about the length of my speech today, because I know I'm the last thing standing between you and your degree. But I worried a lot more at those law enforcement commencements, because all the graduates are armed. Fortunately, I don't have that concern here today.

Today you are embarking on a truly and exciting and new journey. As most of us have been guests at other commencement addresses, I am sure you have heard other speakers say that they envy the graduating class or wish that they could trade places with the graduates.

Let me say to you that I neither envy you nor do I have any desire to trade places with you. When I watched my two boys learn to snowboard, I was amazed by their perseverance, their resiliency and their sheer determination to make it down the mountain. However, I also watched them fall better than 50 times each time they descended the slopes and so "envy" was not something I felt then or now.

Similarly, I do not envy you for the same bumps and bruises you will endure as you navigate this next passage of your life. I am very excited about the promise each of you represents for the future and for the promise the future represents for each of you.

I am excited because the journey you are about to embark on is one I continue to engage in myself; it is a journey which I am far from completing. While I become much more proficient at padding my rear end to soften the inevitable bumps and bruises I encounter, life still offers me plenty of opportunities to explore the unknown.

My first message to you today is... do not mourn the passing of your college years. This is undoubtedly a bitter-sweet day in the truest sense of the word. Many of you probably believe you are leaving the "best four years of your life." I hope that you are not. Imagine for a moment what such a statement would really mean. You are all in your early twenties and have far more life to live than that which has passed you by already. If you were to ask me the best four years of my **life,** I would have to tell **you** I am not finished living my life yet, so you'll have to ask me later.

Now is the time when the many hands which have helped to form your life will begin to recede...not disappear, but to pull back and allow you to continue to shape your own life. This moment is the dividing line between what you have done and the daunting question of what you will do with the rest of your life! One secret I can share with you, you do not have to answer that question today, but it helps to have an overarching vision of at least some of the things you'd like to accomplish in the short term. Many of you will leave here with very big ideas about literally changing the world.

However, it is not the individual person who has any hope of changing the entire world, but rather the aggregate of many people doing small meaningful things. So, in addition to discovering the new role your life is about to take on, I also hope you will consider the many ways you can positively impact our world. Many years ago I was a Big Brother, and during my first assignment as an FBI supervisor I did a fair amount of prison outreach. Ironically, it was in the latter role that I learned the absolute value of vision relative to the path you'd like your life to take. I felt as though many of the prisoners I dealt with were doomed to return to prison because they had no vision of a life different than that which delivered them to prison in the first place. They let life happen to them instead of picking **up** the reins of their life and taking charge of their future. Don't allow yourself to fall into this same trap ~~of~~ and end up in a prison of a different sort.

I have told many groups of new agents that have come to my various offices that I think of them as thoroughbreds, running up and down the beach, muscles rippling, manes flowing in the wind...ready to take on the world. And I warn them as I will warn you today, to be careful, because the FBI, like any large organization, will first try to put a bridle on you, next comes a blanket, they'll sweet-talk you a little bit, and finally they'll put a saddle on you. Before long you're not racing across wild, untamed territories, but rather walking along a trail, coat looking a bit mangy, satisfied to do yesterday what you did today and what you'll do tomorrow. And anyone who has done any horseback riding knows how a trail horse earns a living: keep your head down and follow the rear end in front of you. Not something you all want to do.

How many music, art and drama students will ultimately forgo their dreams, perhaps driven by the expectations of parents, siblings or friends to get a "sensible job." Imagine a world without art, without music and without theater. The world we live in is a complex, fast-moving,

and sometimes violence-prone place that has many daunting problems. In such a world, can there possibly be a more sensible vocation than to pursue a career, a vocation in the arts, in music, or in theater?

I encourage each of you to stay true to your dreams. You may not open on Broadway, but perhaps you will star in community theater. Maybe you won't find the cure for cancer, but your research will be a part of the solution. Maybe you won't completely rid the government of wasteful spending, but your recommendation will save millions of dollars. Modify if you must, but do not abandon your dreams.

I dreamed of this career when I was only in the seventh grade. And I feel very, very fortunate to have been able to make my "dream" a reality.

There will come a time when you won't remember much of what I've said this day nor will you remember many of the other specifics about today. You will remember many other moments during which you laughed, cried, and shared special times with very, very special friends...college is not about "graduation" per se but much more about all of the moments that have led up to this day. The education, friendships, and associations you have made will define your college career years from now.

I have done some wonderful things in the FBI. Returning a kidnapped child to her mother rates as a moment I will never forget. She was taken eight days before Christmas in 1986. I went to the family's residence and saw a home in preparation for a Christmas that would have made any two-year-old proud. There were festive decorations and lights everywhere, inside and out, and there were tons of gifts all over the home. I returned to continue the investigation the next

day and everything -- including the lights outside -- had been taken down. There was going to be no Christmas without this little two-year-old girl.

The little girl was recovered on May 30, 1987, and she was recovered alive. I, along with the detective who worked the case with me, were invited out to the family's home the next day. Everything I saw on December 17th was back up, including the lights outside.

It is moments like this which will define my career. Being engaged in activities that really mattered. I am fortunate to have had such moments and hope to have many more. I get the greatest satisfaction from working hard at something I consider a vocation, not just a job.

I still look forward to going to work every single day. In small ways I know I am making a difference in the lives of people I touch and they, in turn, are making a difference in my life.

My one wish for you all today is that you will find enormous satisfaction in whatever your chosen field and seek not necessarily to change the whole world, but rather to understand the contributions you can make to the bigger picture in whatever environment you find yourself in the future.

I want to share a story that illustrates exactly what I'm talking about. Many years ago, President Johnson was visiting the NASA Space Center in Cape Canaveral and being led through the complex by a throng of NASA VIPs. As the group moved through the complex, President Johnson happens to spot a black man holding a mop standing next to a bucket, and he makes a bee-line for the man. President Johnson introduces himself to the man, and shakes his hand. The man gives the president his name. Then President Johnson asks of the man, who was holding a mop and standing next to a bucket, "What do you do here each day at NASA?"

This man responded, “Mr. President, I come to NASA each day, to help put a man on the moon."

I have to tell you, I absolutely love this story. The answer that the man gives is an attitude I try to inculcate in the people who work with me. The janitor's response was born, not of arrogance, but rather of an understanding that his work, no matter how some may define it as menial, his work contributes to the greater good.

And so it should be with you, wherever you go and whatever you do. Contribute your time and your energy to the cause of medical research, help clean up a neighborhood, teach a kid to read, send a kid to summer camp, fight to save an endangered species, work to create a more responsive and responsible government because it won’t happen if you do not become engaged.

Get excited about what you do ... or find something else to do. I still love what I do. I still love going to work each and every day. Don’t let life just happen to you; do not let the winds of fate blow you from one locale to another, one job to another...You decide what you will do. Becoming an agent for me was a lifelong dream, but it is the reality of being an agent that has kept me in this career for these many years.

Be bold ... When life presents you with those moments when you have to stand in opposition to conventional wisdom don't be afraid to do so. Don’t be afraid to move across the country in pursuit of your goals. Don’t be trapped.

I cannot tell you how honored I am to stand before you and share this special moment with each of you. I want to conclude my remarks by making reference to a song that was an instant hit with me the very first time I heard it. Its message is essentially the same as my message for you today.

The song is sung by Lee Ann Womack and in it she sings, "....When you get the choice to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance," one line in the song. Clearly the word "dance" is a metaphor for all the challenges that will come your way and for all those times when you will have to decide whether you're going to "sit it out or dance."

As Lee Ann Womack sings so beautifully in the song, I too hope, more often than not, each of you will choose to "dance."

Thank you so much for allowing me to share this moment with you.