



2007

Commencement Address

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Recommended Citation

Kalodimos, Demetria, "Commencement Address" (2007). *2007 Highlights*. Paper 2.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/comm_2007/2

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President and Mrs. Wilson, Faculty, Friends, Family, and the class of double-oh-seven...

Welcome to the moment your parents have been fantasizing about, for 4 long years.

We gather today with the very fresh realization that no college campus anywhere... is immune to pain or poison.

But college campuses everywhere are spotted with towers of strong stone.

We should have no doubtthat at Virginia Tech, the stain of violence will be replaced with something even more fierce...resilience, and a renewal of faith.

Take a good look around and commit this picture to memory , in living color....

If you're like I was on graduation day 26 years ago....this is more green than you'll be seeing for quite awhile.

If you're like I was on graduation day...

You're sweating acceptance to grad school somewherehoping that letter comes before the first student loan payment's due.

If you're like I was... your room isn't packed,
your gas tank is bone dry,

It's not even your car..... it's your parents station wagon

your parking tickets are unpaid

there's wet laundry in the dryer

Breakfast was leftover Gumby's Pokey sticks

and you're considering keeping this cap on, all day long...for fear of the hat hair underneath.....what that might look like in pictures

But fear not...

It's high time ...and the right time, to bust out of this Wesleyan bubble...and write the first draft of your life story..

A rough cut...as we say in the edit room.

It may sound cliché but we journalists believe this...

Everybody has a story...and every good story has a twist.

And if you're like I was....

You'll twist alright....and find yourself changing that "perfect plan" you've had in mind for yourself starting today....

And guess what?

It's okay.

That was a little Dr Phil-ish wasn't it?

Really though, ...it's perfectly alright to start a brand new plan today.

Just don't plan on changing the world... trust me, there's not a diaper big enough

I had no idea at my Wesleyan graduation, that I'd actually become a journalist.

My music degree wasn't exactly the credential a television station was looking for...

But looking back, this school, and the campus radio station, full of scratchy vinyl in the basement of Kemp Hall, helped me take a fearless, hairpin turn toward a new career.

Wait...just a minute

I've got to confess a little something before we go any further...

I stole this album 26 years ago from WESN....its still written here on the cover..

President Wilson I hope you'll accept the Brothers Johnson funk album, with my deepest apologies...

Wow...what a load off my shoulders...you have no idea....

Let the record show...I returned the record....

Now...Back to our story..

A fearless leap got me to this campus.

.I transferred to Wesleyan as a junior....halfway through my undergraduate years....

When I was supposed to know what I was doing....I decided to make a big change.

It was the late 70's...the height of disco

Not just low tech...I'm talking no tech

Web sites were what grew behind the beds in Dodds Hall...

Blackberries were something we put on cereal at Saga....

Forget I-Pods and ear-buds...

The best speakers were the biggest speakers... floor to ceiling at the TKE house.

To say I was broke is saying a lot

While I was collecting pop bottles like a bag lady, for the 5 cent refund at Kroger... my roommate had a charge account at Neirstheimers...thank God and Mr Anderson for that.

Oh...But I did have a plan...

At best, I'd be a musician...

At worst, I'd hang around a bunch of them in a radio station somewhere...

Little did I know my Wesleyan experience was already preparing me.... to cover some of the great news stories of our time.

Take my campus jobs....I lasted a grand total of 2 days in a hair net , pulling red hot forks out of a dishwasher at Saga..

It was then and there that I learned how to raise an issue...and make a passionate argument for change.

Afterall, who could be expected to play the flute with chapped ,dishpan hands.... Furthermore....would a Sigma Kappa be caught dead in a hairnet?

I was much better suited for job number 2....sorting the incoming mail at Dodds .

I learned quickly which magazines came in "plain brown wrappers" ...yes, I peeked and that was a "higher" education, let me tell you.

It seems, it also works in reverse.

Five years ago, I produced a feature documentary that did pretty well at the Chicago Film Festival .

The subject was "Injurious George" the oddest criminal ever to terrorize Nashville, Tennessee...a man who obsessively stomped on womens feet

Now I learn a compulsive foot fondler was loose here on the Wesleyan campus.....coincidence?

I think not.

A good reporter digs deep ...does solid research ...and I've been in the "pipeline" so to speak....studying you, the Wesleyan class of double oh seven.

It seems greatness has already been tapping at the door....

There's a young composer out there.... who heard beautiful music in car alarms...

What will he hear next?

The drama major/ turned filmmaker... who broke new ground on a celebrated Spanish playwright.

I expect to bump into him on a red carpet someday.

Then there's the marathon runner who went the distance in memory of her mother and grandmother ...both lost to Ovarian cancer..

I've got a feeling that race was just her "warm up".

A brilliant double major in this class was named a "Lincoln Laureate" for exemplifying the best qualities of Honest Abe.. (he's the one out there in the top hat and beard, I think that's taking it a bit too far)

And the budding environmental scientist who won a tough scholarship and now has her eye on the Peace Corps.

Those are just a few of the great stories you've already started,..

Imagine the sequels...

You know In 25 years of news reporting.... I've exposed some bad guys...been caught in a shootout....even talked to a serial killer face to face, but I got to tell ya,.... nothing tops a commencement speech for pressure.

I've been researching a lot of speeches...., since I never paid attention to any of mine.

The pressure's on to offer some pearl...some great wisdom to put in the passenger seat.... when you've got the quad in your rearview mirror.

The advice I offer today is what we call "broadcast style"
brief, direct... I hope, important...
I've whittled it down to 2 words...

Question Everything.

It's worked for me..

When I noticed trucks full of Hispanic men in all-white rural Tennessee, I asked why...and ended up exposing exploitation of migrant tobacco workers...

When I questioned why so many of those tobacco pickers ended up in hospital E.R's....I learned that wet crops and no gloves led to nicotine poisoning.

When I asked why 19 children were born with cleft lips in a single Tennessee county....I found a municipal water well, poisoned by a leaky landfill.

When every un-identified John and Jane Doe ended up at the state's largest anthropology lab...I found research being done on dead bodies without the first effort at obtaining consent.

Eventually, families of veterans and ordinary people got long-delayed funerals and burial with dignity.

In the subway stations of Romania....why did all the kids seem to play with ziplock bags?

Because huffing chemicals killed their appetites.

Orphans gobbled the bubblegum we gave them, paper and all..

they'd never seen bubblegum before....didn't know how to unwrap it.

And when songs started sounding really familiar on the radio...and I could hum along to something brand new...

I asked who really wrote that?... and stumbled onto a cottage industry and new legal specialty...attorneys hunting for copyright infringement and stolen songs.

If we're persistent, and focused.... and a little lucky... our questions lead to answers and action..

Year after year, when we run into that family who won't have Thanksgiving dinner...or the elderly sweltering without air conditioning... or the kids who need transplants...people rally, congregations help and often, we get the happy ending everybody's hoping for.

.. TV news doesn't have the best reputation these days for depth or compassion, its true.

We're competitive and we're in a hurrybut lets face it.....so are you.

It wasn't long ago that we had to wait for film to develop....

Now our cellphones take pictures.

Everyone's got a camera...and a good idea of what will make a splash...or a career or a quick windfall.

Even mass killers who mail manifestos to networks...

Question everything...even what you see on TV.

The Rodney King tape ushered in the era of citizen journalism...
it can shine a bright and necessary light on injustice for sure.....but we don't always
pause before going live with explosive images that lack context or verification.

Now blogs break stories...
My space and Youtube fill in the blanks
Green screens change the background
Competition fuels the fire....
and credibility burns.

Question everything
Until you're satisfied that your truth has been revealed.

Question everything
Until you know where You need to go.... and how best to get there

Question everything
Then do the work,... and put in the time necessary to find answers

We all did it as kids...and it came naturally.
Where are we going...
Why Mom?
Are we there yet???

Somewhere along the line we stopped asking...we gave up too soon...took no for an
answer.

Question everything.

Can they really do that?
Is this right?
Do I agree?
Can I help?
Could this make a difference?

Trust your own curiosity...mind your own moral compass....
In time, your purpose..... your role....your truth will be revealed.

And if you're as blessed as I've been....
with wonderful parents,
sisters who are my best friends,
a brother who hung the moon,
3 nieces who I hope will be Wesleyan grads one day....
And best of all, a second chance to find the husband I should have had in the first
place.....a successful musician ,no less..
When it feels right....and you can sleep at night.....it probably is .
And that applies to your job
Your love
Your volunteer work
What you spend or don't spend
Question everything...you may be really fun to live with for awhile....
But you'll be true to yourself

I've now lived in Nashville, Tennessee longer than my hometown of Chicago or
anywhere else ..
I may live in Nashville, but I opted not to go with the sequined wagon-wheel cap and
gown, just to keep it professional..

In Music city we have a saying.... it all starts with a song.

So I'm gonna end with one.

From the late Townes Van Zandt.

He wrote

*Everything is not enough
And nothing is too much to bear.
Where you've been..... is good and gone
All you keep.... is the getting there.*

*To live is to fly
Both Low and high,
So shake the dust off of your wings*

And the sleep out of your eyes.

Thank you Wesleyan...it's been great to be back..