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Commencement Address-"Unlocking Your Story"

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Commencement

Commencement Address: "Unlocking Your Story"

Bill Damaschke '85

May 1, 2016

Thank you President Jensen, Provost Green & Mr. Vinyard for this incredible honor and for inviting me to address Illinois Wesleyan University's Class of 2016.

While I know many of you were looking forward to an outdoor ceremony, I am delighted to be speaking to you here at a building that has been named after one of films I worked on - The SHREK CENTER. I'm excited to see the new Kung Fu Panda Gymnasium later today....

Congratulations, President Eric Jensen on YOUR recent inauguration.

I have spent some time this weekend with President Jensen – and I believe he will be great leader for the next chapter of this prestigious University.

I am also humbled to have my drama professor, Dr. John Ficca here with us today. When I attended IWU from 1981 – 1985 (That's right – before any of you were born) Dr. Ficca was a great advocate of mine. I certainly would not be where I am today without his guidance and compassion.

I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge all of the parents here today.

They are the ones who have made so many sacrifices to allow us to wear these caps and gowns.

And, I would like to specifically thank my parents, who are also here with us today.

They made immeasurable sacrifices to support me in going to college and help me make my way out into the world – we can never thank our parents enough.



Let's hear it for all the parents.

But most importantly, THANK YOU, the Class of 2016, for having me join YOU on YOUR Commencement Day.

I would especially like to thank you for all of the stress, pressure, and anxiety that comes along with delivering a commencement address.

You have to be smart, funny, same something memorable – be inspiring...

And then there is the stress, when you realize that you are OLD ENOUGH to give a commencement address!

Was it really 31 years ago that I graduated?

And, yet even though my story has taken me down many roads – I wondered, can I still feel the same mix of emotions of fear and excitement about what lies ahead that I felt 31 years ago as a graduate – in your very seats?

The answer to both questions is YES!

Well, the truth is... I have been asked several times to speak at Illinois Wesleyan University's graduation and it never quite worked out.

I had every reason to avoid it.

I was too busy working – always traveling... Yet, down deep, I had no idea what I would said.

But, when they asked this year, I said yes...

Because, I too am finding myself at an inflection point – a graduation of sorts – in writing MY own next chapter.

SO, I thought if I had something TO offer a graduating class on writing THEIR story from a blank page, THIS would be the year to do so.

So speaking of blank of pages, let's take a minute to talk about how I prepared for today.

Once I realized I was in it and committed... I took this assignment by the reigns and approached it exactly as I did for term papers and finals during my days at IWU...

I did a ton of research... Cleaned my apartment... and found every excuse possible not to write it.... AND then I did it last week!

Sound familiar?

AND during my countless hours of procrastination, I visited friends at places much like Tobins, The Dugout, and the Quad –

I am here to reassure you...I have lived in many places and traveled around the world... YOU will always find places like Tobins, The Dugout, and the Quad to procrastinate with friends.

So here's where I landed...I am going to talk to you today about what I know best – what I dreamed of doing during my days at Illinois Wesleyan University – and have done for 31 years – CREATING Stories – and specifically some of the things that you may want to consider as you Unlock YOUR OWN STORIES.

Starting with the basics, every GREAT story is comprised of these 6 essential ingredients:

The Characters,

The Plot,

The Setting,

A Conflict,

The Resolution,

And an overarching THEME that weaves it together....

For Example – In the Kingdom of FAR FAR AWAY Shrek’s Swamp is invaded by Fairytale Creatures including a very talkative Donkey. With the goal of getting them off his land so that he could be alone, he go’s on a journey to save a princess, Fiona who is locked in a tower with a secret of her own. Along the way he becomes the hero by rescuing the princess from a dragon and defeating the Evil Lord Faarquad, gains a best friend, falls in love and learns that everyone, no matter what - deserves to be loved.

As I went back to my research, I found that Illinois Wesleyan University has an amazing list of distinguished graduates – ALL with powerful stories...

Among them Senators, Governors, Congressman, Oscar Nominees, Grammy Winner, CEOs, Scientists, Activists, NBA, MBL, NFL players, and Playwrights –

....Making me feel even more pressure among giants

But, then I realized, that their stories were not dissimilar to mine...that there were some common and critical character traits that we all shared.

I like to refer to these traits as the KEYS to the character. These are the KEYS that I am going to talk to you about today as they are the KEYS that have helped me to Unlock my story.

As far as the PLOT of my story goes – well, I will tell you a bit about that today and you can look the rest up on Wikipedia or Google it –

BUT, what the internet won’t tell you – is WHAT I was thinking and HOW I was acting along the way – that’s CHARACTER – the character’s keys – For me THOSE ARE

Working hard

Being honest

Just getting on with it

Being curious, and

Always striving to do a great job

These are choices you make for how you conduct yourself

If I have weathered the journey so far that YOU are about to embark upon, it’s largely due to my humble roots, steeped in these character keys: ALL OF WHICH I LEARNED FROM MY PARENTS

These keys have served me well over the last 31 years.

And they don’t seem to dull even after using them over and over again. And they come in especially handy during times of change, challenge, and conflict.

They can help you open new doors that bring great opportunities.

So, I often get the question – How did I get from being a musical theater major at Illinois Wesleyan University to the Chief Creative Officer of DreamWorks Animation? How did I achieve my DREAM of being a part of creating stories?

The oldest of 7 children from the South Side of Chicago, I am the son of Bill Sr., a truck driver, and Carol an executive assistant – their example gave me the foundation to go out into the world.

I was the first person in my family to go to college.

And while my parents did not have means to pay for it... they said we would just figure it out...

Their “let’s just get on with it approach” propelled me to go to a school far out of my reach... along with lots of financial aid and a job at SAGA.

After 4 years at Illinois Wesleyan University, I graduated with a degree in Musical Theater.

And I had decided to move to New York to pursue performing.

While I had high hopes of becoming a stage actor, my mother’s message was SIMPLE and CLEAR...

Whatever ever you choose to do – Billy –
I don’t care what you do –
I don’t care if you are garbage man –
Just be the best garbage man you can be.

SO, while I was never actually a garbage man, I was many other things....

I was a waiter, telemarketer, office temp, toy demonstrator at FAO Schwartz, a record store sales clerk, the list goes on....

At each of these jobs, I followed the example my parents led with throughout my childhood – work hard and do your best.

So as a young actor on Broadway, a waiter in LA, a Producer and even as the Chief Creative Officer of DreamWorks – I would go to work every day and ask how can I be of value and most importantly how could I be GREAT at the task at hand.

Now how do you do this when the job or task at hand doesn’t seem like it will ever lead to the career or goals you have set for yourself? How will this lead to me fulfilling my dream?

One of the most important KEYS that I am going to share with you is CURIOSITY – the importance of being curious about other people and things.

My mother has an innate curiosity in people. She asks important questions about their interests, their work, their family... and in doing so she makes them feel like they are the most important person in that very moment.

Through her curiosity she is able to identify an individual’s gifts and truly be a champion throughout their lives – because she remembers what makes them tick!

My father pursues knowledge about topics in a deep way – whether it’s guitars & music or old movie westerns, or how to build the best deck in the backyard or assemble toys for 7 kids on Christmas morning – He never seems to be “just getting through” the task. He is curious about how to accomplish something and always proud of doing a great job.

Being curious about the world and the people around you, asking questions & pursuing knowledge, leads to a more fulfilling and rewarding experience. - I have found CURIOSITY to be beneficial in any role.

Simply put – BEING INTERESTED MAKES YOU INTERESTING and BETTER AT ANY JOB

I can tell you that I always notice when someone is a great server at a restaurant, intern, production assistant, artistic trainee, etc.

So whatever your next step is – throw yourself into it – We all love characters who are trying and striving to achieve things – these make for the most engaging stories and characters – well – this also makes for the most engaging people.

For 20 years, I had the incredible privilege of working in one of the most creative industries, in one of the most exciting studios formed in the 20th Century.

Even while pursuing acting, I knew down deep that I wanted to produce or direct –

So at 30, I decided I should just go work for a producer...

The reason I was able to get a job as a production assistant at the newly formed DreamWorks Animation Studio, was in part because of some of the odd jobs I had along the way – that quite honestly, I had no idea how they would become part of my own story and guide me towards fulfilling my dream.

Experience in customer service, retail, and as a temp was HOW I was able to fake my way into a job at a studio.

My mother's words, “Be Great at Every Job No Matter How Small,” served me at that moment.

I was the 40th person to be hired as a production assistant at DreamWorks Animation and was so excited to be surrounded by artists, engineers, and entrepreneurs.

DreamWorks Animation was a start up – so I did everything from scheduling, budgeting, hiring, to buying the lamps and office supplies for the artists –

I was able to quickly advance, because the things I brought to the table were valued. The KEYS I have been talking about.

These guiding principles, combined with years of studying acting, film, theater and storytelling made me a trusted voice in both the creation of DreamWorks Films and in building the company's culture.

Let's talk about some of the things that can help overcome some of Character Conflicts that can come up along the way

#1 – YES vs NO Thinking

In telling stories, and in living your life – nothing can be more destructive to creativity and accomplishment than NO.

No is a major buzz kill.

But people are smart and analytical and so it's easy to come up with all the problems of something...

So while the task at times seemed impossible, I had a simple motto when we would be in story discussions or when talking about strategic goals for the company –

Tell me 10 reasons why this idea could work before you offer all the reasons why it won't. This kind of YES AND way of thinking led to some great story breakthroughs.

For me personally, this has been something that I have tried to integrate into my own life – The list of “You should and

You shouldn'ts” and “That is a crazy idea” can really bog you down.

It is freeing to at least go through the process of seeing how you would do something before making the choice not to.

#2 – Seek Approval in the RIGHT Places

I saw some examples early on where people did everything they could to please their boss and missed the opportunity to focus their energies on their job and the most important asset at the company – the people.

Simply put, seek approval not from those you work for, but from those who work across from you and for you.

#3 – See the Bigger Picture

As I rose at DreamWorks, I was part of a team responsible for managing the careers of thousands of people.

People would always come to me focused on what they could get out of the job – as I call them the 3 C's: Cash, Credit and Clarity.

They wanted to know how much they would be paid, what their job title or position would be – what their credit would be, and wanted to know exactly how to be successful in their individual job.

Yes, all of these must be addressed and managed through – BUT – thinking mostly about yourself can be a derail.

I would try to quickly flip the conversation to different set of 3 C's – Community, Creativity and Compassion.

Community - How can you contribute to make your TEAM successful

Creativity - how can you innovate in each position you have and

Compassion - always remember to think about your customer, audience and co-worker – put yourself in their hearts and minds

In sum – as you start your careers – It's not just WHAT you do – It's HOW you do it that matters.

Every organization needs Community, Creativity and Compassion in order to COMPETE and SUCCEED.

Back to building a great story.

I have spent some time talking with you today about Character and Character Traits, Conflict, and now I want to talk to you about Theme.

Each film at DreamWorksAnimation and their beloved characters have lessons that are based on Universal Life Truths.

Prince of Egypt – There is greatness in each person. You must embrace the truth.

Shrek – Everyone should be loved for exactly who they are.

Madagascar – Life is about adventure and friendships.

Kung Fu Panda – There is no secret ingredient to achieve your dreams and each one of us has great power and strength to be a hero.

How to Train Your Dragon – Even the smallest person can make the greatest difference and don't be afraid of others.

These “Classic” themes never go out of style.

I find myself returning to these themes and those handy keys my parents taught right now in my own life.

Over a year ago, I moved back to NY to Produce 2 Broadway Bound Musicals. This was as a result of a large reorganization at DreamWorks Animation where my specific role was eliminated as the company prepared for its next chapter. In the world of one chapter ending – I would no longer be a part the only thing I knew for the past 20 years and the place I was most comfortable – (It was my adult college) –

Just like writing this speech – I found myself facing a blank page.

So I did what I have always done and called my mom and she said – You will figure it out, just get on with it and try to be great at the next thing you do – and so I am. By returning to those KEYS.

See, no matter how much the world changes, the demands of the workplace shift, or the chapters of your own life move forward...

Working hard, being honest, just getting on with it, being curious and striving to be great in any job you take on, are always valued. All of you already have these keys and many other – you wouldn't be here today if you didn't.

As I mentioned, I did some research to prepare for today and I was reminded that Martin Luther King, Jr spoke not once, but twice here at Illinois Wesleyan University in 1961 and 1966. It was critical time of change – an inflection point – in our country's history – he used this platform to ignite the idea of new opportunities for Americans across our country.

Like then, 2016 is a time of great volatility and change, as well as opportunities.

When I watch the news it can seem like we are a part of a world that is made up of “us and them” divisions –

Republican and democratic

Black and white

Male and female

Straight and gay

Rich and poor

Those who were born here and elsewhere

And more...

SO with all of these divisions among us –

I challenge you to think about your role –

What value can you add in your lifetime –

What will your story be?

So I decided to help you draft your story. And in doing so, I took a stab at the first paragraph... and I think your story is off to an amazing start.

The Illinois Wesleyan University Class of 2016 Commenced on May 1 - surrounded by their families and loved ones, with their classmates who would become their lifelong friends. They had an amazing foundation from their brilliant and passionate professors and teachers from an incredible school.

They heard the most inspiring commencement address from a charming and witty man, who looked far younger than one who could have graduated 31 years ago.

They went into a world, though filled with divisions, change, and unpredictability, was also a world that offered great opportunity, where they made huge contributions and a difference.

They followed their own paths, no matter how windy and twisty they were.

They understood that there were no shortcuts.

That compassion and hard work were critical and they were curious about the world and people around them.

Greatness existed in each one of them – they were loved for who they were – and each of them became the hero of their own story.

They lived their lives filled with adventure and friendships.

I'm excited to learn about each of your stories!

Congratulations!

Contact: smilliga@iwu.edu

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