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Faison Exhorts IWU Graduates to Wake Up to Life

BLOOMINGTON, ILL. -- Actor Frankie Faison, a member of Illinois Wesleyan's Class of 1971, brought the 452 members of IWU's Class of 2002 to their feet Sunday (5/15) by reciting passages from Shakespeare, Dr. Seuss, and 19th-century poet William Ernest Henley in exhorting them to "wake up to life."

- [Read the complete text of Frankie Faison's Commencement Address \(html\)](#) or [\(pdf\)](#)
- [Watch the video of Frankie Faison's Commencement Address \(requires RealPlayer\)](#)

Faison was the principal speaker at the commencement exercises held in The Eckley Quadrangle under bright blue skies.

In addition to awarding the undergraduate degrees, the university presented Faison within an honorary doctorate. [IWU Trustee Robert M. Reardon, an ophthalmologist who is former president of the Illinois State Medical Society, also received an honorary degree.](#)

[Several members of the graduating class were given special honors during the ceremony](#)

Faison, whose 30-year career includes numerous theatre, motion picture, and television credits, began by reciting Henley's poem *Invictus* and closed with Dr. Seuss's *Oh The Places You'll Go*. In between Faison recited lines from *The Tempest*, one of the plays in which he had performed as an undergraduate student at IWU.

Throughout his presentation, Faison emphasized the importance of treating all people with respect and remaining true to yourself.

"Your life can change in the blink of an eye," said Faison. "It can change from bad to good, from good to bad, from better to best. Be prepared for the good; be prepared for the bad; most of all, be prepared. As an actor, I live a life of ups and downs, highs and lows, feast or famine. To me, being prepared means being at peace and living in harmony with myself.

"One moment I'm wondering where my next month's rent is coming from. The next moment, I'm being jetted across country first class, put up in a Four Seasons hotel with an unlimited expense account, not to mention a fat contract to boot. But when you remember who you are and where you come from, you're prepared to live in dignity and experience the ups and downs. You know that in your heart you're the same person, no matter what happens to you, because you're the captain of your soul."

Citing cases when he has either been awarded or rejected for a role because of the color of his skin, Faison said that he has never thought of himself as a "black actor."

"I am an actor first and black second, in the same way that I think of myself as a human being who happens to be black," said Faison, who earned Tony and Drama Desk nominations for Best Supporting Actor in the Broadway play *Fences*. "I challenge all of you to be strong because you too will be tested and confronted with these same kinds of prejudice and ignorance."

"Judge fairly as you move through life," he said. "One of the great pieces of advice I can give you is this: treat all people with the same respect with which you would want them to treat you."

Faison said that he has always believed that "each and every one of us has one thing that we do better than most people. For me, it was acting. You need to get in touch with whatever that talent is in you and not be afraid of it, not be afraid to work hard and develop it to its fullest. Just having some talent, that's not enough."

Faison's motion picture credits include *Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* in which he played the memorable role of the conscientious prison guard, Barney, to critical acclaim. He has also appeared in *Mississippi Burning*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Coming to America*, *Manhunter*, *The Money Pit*, *Ragtime*, *The Chosen*, *Rich Man's Wife*, *Sommersby*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, and *I Love Trouble*.

Starting in June, Faison will be part of the ensemble featured in the new HBO series, *The Wire*.