

CHARGE TO THE UNDERGRADUATES
President Joe Bertolino
December 16, 2016

I'm back again!

Before we present all of you with your degrees – and I know that you can't wait to get to that moment – I have a few parting thoughts for you.

And indeed, there has been a lot to think about in these past 12 months.

I don't need to dwell on the fact that the last year has seen many difficult issues arise both at home and abroad.

Some of them will linger, and more will undoubtedly arise.

In Connecticut, we're reminded every December at the loss incurred by senseless violence. And this year we also turn our eyes abroad to Aleppo in Syria - to the grave humanitarian crisis we face internationally.

It is how we deal with these issues, what we learn from them, that truly counts.

When we see communities coming together to support one another, speaking up and fighting injustice, engaging in acts of kindness and allowing individuals to be their best selves – then we know there is hope.

And when you think about it, we see these type of efforts at Southern every day; in our daily interactions with others, through the community service you've engaged in, in the work of tutors, peer leaders, RAs, mentors...and all of you.

Southern Connecticut State University is a reflection of our world – the good and the bad, the successes and the failures, the tragedies and the triumphs. And despite all that is wrong with the world, there is so much more that is good and right.

As a member of a community, we have a larger responsibility than that we owe to ourselves – we are accountable to each other.

When we go out into the community, when we participate, when we interact with others, we must strive to be “intentionally kind.” Life is too short and too fragile not to be.

It could be as simple as helping a person carry a package. Offering a helping hand to a friend, a co-worker, or just a passerby. Saying a kind word, giving someone words of encouragement.

It could be a bit more challenging, confronting inappropriate behavior or bigoted and inappropriate remarks, standing up for an injustice, fighting for what you believe is right.

I'm sure that many of you have heard about the teenaged Pakistani student Malala Yousafzai (YOUS-UFF-ZEYE), who received the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize for her struggle against the oppression of the young and for the right of all children to receive an education.

At age 17, Malala was the youngest-ever Nobel Prize laureate – she joked that she was probably the only Peace Prize winner to be still fighting with her younger brothers!

Two years prior to her award, when she was just 15, Malala was targeted by the Taliban for her outspoken views promoting the right for girls to attend school...

and she was shot and severely wounded as she sat aboard a school bus near her home in the northwest corner of Pakistan.

Think about that for a minute – this young woman, several years removed from adulthood – was almost killed because she spoke up in support of a basic right that all of us take for granted.

After such a traumatic event, many would have been silenced, choosing a life of anonymity over the public glare, shying away from the threat of more violence.

But this brave, vibrant teen chose to raise her voice (quote) “not so I can shout, but so those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.”

Malala remains a highly visible and vocal advocate for the right to an education beyond basic literacy, which is still denied to millions of children worldwide because of conflict, poverty or social injustice.

“Let us become the first generation to decide to be the last,” Malala said in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech. “Let us become the first generation that decides to be the last that sees empty classrooms, lost childhoods, and wasted potentials.

“Let this be the last time that a girl or a boy spends their childhood in a factory.

“Let this be the last time that a girl is forced into early child marriage.

“Let this be the last time that a child loses life in war.

“Let this be the last time that we see a child out of school.

“Let this end with us...”

In the spirit of Malala's impassioned message, I again encourage you, our graduates of 2016, to use your degrees not only to advance your chosen career, but also to advance your world, by focusing on your fellow human beings.

Use the knowledge and skills you have gained at Southern creatively and generously.

Be a volunteer in your community.

Be an active voice for peace and justice.

Be a champion for understanding and acceptance.

Never take for granted the opportunity to think, the privilege to serve, and the chance to make a contribution, wherever you may be.

Because you are now part of a select group of individuals- only 30 percent nationally - who have completed a college degree.

And there are millions and millions of young people – in this country and worldwide – who feel they will never have the opportunity to stand in your shoes.

But you can help to change that, by taking all the knowledge and life skills you've gained and paying it forward

Because what you do with all that you have learned and experienced at Southern will ultimately help shape the character of the times we live in.

Graduates of 2016:

The degree you will receive today represents a wonderful accomplishment.

I hope for you it is just the first of many on your journey through life.

I extend to all of you my best wishes for future success and invite you to keep in touch and visit with us often at here at Southern.

Congratulations - and go Owls!

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