

**SCSU Graduate Commencement
CHARGE TO THE GRADUTES
May 18, 2017
President Joe Bertolino**

Graduates, family, friends, faculty, other guests – I welcome you all to Southern's graduate commencement ceremony.

This event is a chance for us to recognize and honor the work of our graduates.

I'm still in my first year as president of Southern, having arrived last July, and I'm enjoying experiencing for the first time all of the pomp and circumstance of the spring commencement ceremonies.

Graduation ceremonies do have a comforting sameness about them, from institution to institution, but every school's commencement really is unique, because of the people who come together to make the ceremony what it is.

Graduates: No one knows better than those closest to you – your family and friends – just how many hours you have put into earning your degrees, the nature of the sacrifices you have made, and just how much earning your degree means to you.

But those of us within the Southern family who have taught you, guided you, and mentored you, also have a pretty good idea of what a significant day today is for you.

And on behalf of your soon-to-be alma mater, and all those who have helped you on your journey, I congratulate you.

At Southern, we encourage our students to be lifelong learners.

Life itself is the best teacher, of course, but if we're not open to the lessons, we can't grow from them.

And even though you are all students of life, sometimes that isn't enough.

Your job may require you to go back to school to earn an advanced degree.

Or you may wish to enter a new field that requires specialized study.

No matter the reason you chose to earn a graduate degree -- it took courage for you to go back to school.

And to actually earn that degree took not only courage, but sacrifice, persistence, and a lot of late nights and cups of coffee.

The phrase "lifelong learning" sounds nice, but the reality of it is often challenging.

But believe me – in the long run, staying curious and open to new experiences and an evolving understanding of the world, can be among life's greatest rewards.

It is especially rewarding if you use your education to help others.

Marian Wright Edelman, the great American activist for children's rights, said, "Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it."

I couldn't agree more.

In my speech at my inauguration ceremony last month, I talked about building an "ethic of care" at Southern.

An "ethic of care," as defined by the feminist scholar Carol Gilligan, is: "an ethic grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms) and heard with respect."

In my speech, I challenged all of us within the Southern community to instill an ethic of care here at the university... by building relationships centered on dignity, respect, kindness, compassion, and civility.

I hope that all of you had a chance to contribute to and benefit from Southern's "ethic of care" culture during your time here.

And I hope you will take it with you as you leave us, and share it.

"Education," as Ronald Kangas of Wayne State University has observed, "is more than books. It is taking the time to cultivate friends and understand others."

I truly believe that by working together and listening to each other, with everyone contributing what they can, we can achieve a greater good in the world.

And this is a fitting message for our newly-minted graduates to take with them as they take the next steps in their educational journeys.

You may have seen a video recently on social media – it's been making the rounds, for good reason --

It tells the story of Thomas Hastings -- a 10-year-old boy from Windsor, Connecticut, with muscular dystrophy and congenital scoliosis -- who was given an opportunity by the Make-A-Wish Foundation to express his fondest wish.

This wasn't hard for Thomas – as a huge fan of baseball and the Boston Red Sox, he wished for his own baseball field.

Thomas' health conditions have prevented him from getting to play the game that he loves.

Born with scoliosis, he has already had 14 back surgeries as a result of the curvature of his spine, and doctors diagnosed him with muscular dystrophy right after his first birthday.

But thanks to the help of Make-A-Wish, the Red Sox, and many volunteers, Thomas received his own 25 percent scale replica of Fenway Park, right in his own backyard.

It took the Red Sox head groundskeeper and over 100 volunteers from the Hastings' community 37 days to make Thomas' dream come true.

And it's all there: the scoreboard, the Citgo sign, the Green Monster, even the same turf used at the real Fenway Park.

You have to see the video to believe it – just google “Fantasy Fenway” and “Make-A-Wish” when you have a chance.

You will witness a huge number of kind-hearted people coming together to transform a suburban backyard into a Major League Baseball field.

All to make the wish of one child come true.

As Thomas' father says, “We saw the greatness and the goodness of people” in the building of the ball field.

Making Thomas' wish come true does show the goodness of people, and it shows what we can do when we come together around a common goal.

The ethic of care was present in Windsor, when those hundreds of volunteers showed up to help build Thomas' ball field.

And it can be present anywhere we decide to listen, to empathize, and to take action on behalf of others.

And even though today is all about you – the graduates –

Remember to always look for opportunities to give of yourself.

Serving the community, and creating meaning in your own life – this is what it's all about.

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

Making a real difference in just one person's life makes you a hero.

Each one of us -- moved by a spirit to serve, or to contribute to a body of knowledge -- is capable of making a difference.

Remember -- it's not about you -- it's all about making a difference in the world around you.

The great anthropologist Margaret Meade is famously quoted as saying, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Truth.

So, graduates --

My charge to you may sound lofty and impossible.

But remember the words of Margaret Meade.

Muster your courage and your very best qualities.

Follow your passion.

You have the education and the capacity for hard work and dedication.

Find something or someone in need of what you can offer.

Go out and do good.

Each of you has it in you to be a hero.

I'm proud of your achievements, and I look forward to watching what you'll do next.

My congratulations to you all.