

**SCSU Graduate Commencement
CHARGE TO THE GRADUATES
May 17, 2018
President Joe Bertolino**

Hello, everyone!

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.

Graduation ceremonies 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.

You know, at undergraduate commencements, it’s typical for speakers and students to talk about entering that shadowy place that is referred to as “The Real World.”

This term is really just shorthand for the unknown, the great beyond – for what awaits the newly-minted college graduates as they take their first steps into a new stage of life, one that will demand more of them every day.

Of course, we all know that YOU – today’s graduates - have been living in the real world all along – some with more “reality” than others.

At graduate commencements, we don’t talk to about entering “The Real World.”

We know you’re already in it, doing the work and carrying that responsibility.

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.

Courage, sacrifice, and a lot of late nights. Trust me, I remember....I went to school 7 years part time to get my graduate degree.....studying on a train, early mornings and late evenings. I actually wrote my entire dissertation on yellow legal pads! So, I know what you have been through!

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

You may have experienced obstacles and setbacks during your time here that made you think you'd never finish that degree.

But your resilience got you through.

Former Vice President Joe Biden, who was a guest here at Southern this spring, when speaking of resilience, has famously written, “My own father had always said the measure of a man wasn't how many times or how hard he got knocked down, but how fast he got back up.”

The fact that you are sitting here today is testament to your ability to find a way to get back up when life knocks you down.

And we all get knocked down, at one time or another.

That's just life.

It's what you do about it that counts.

The world around us is changing rapidly and dramatically, and often, we may feel helpless or in a quandary about how we can make a meaningful contribution.

Let me tell you something:

Simply listening, being present and engaged, and ready to act, is a contribution in and of itself.

Taking action – speaking out or coming to another person's aid – is a contribution.

Our contributions can be small or large – each one makes a difference.

One thing I have loved about this university from the first time I set foot on its campus is its engagement with the surrounding community.

Our students, faculty, and staff, are out there, volunteering their time and working in the schools, in neighborhoods, in businesses, right alongside the folks who make the city and the state run.

I'm proud of the Southern community, because so many of us do put others first, and reach out our hands to help when it's needed.

Another visitor to our campus this spring, Gold Star father Khizr Khan, wrote in his memoir, *An American Family*, "So what if you are thirsty? Always be a river for everyone."

In other words, look beyond your own needs and be a source of support for others.

That's what makes a community.

And it doesn't only happen on a large scale – these connections can happen on the most basic level and still be meaningful.

Vice President Biden wrote in his memoir, *Promise Me Dad*, about his son Beau's fight with brain cancer:

"I try to be mindful, at all times, of what a difference a small human gesture can make to people in need. What does it really cost to take a moment to look someone in the eye, to give him a hug, to let her know, 'I get it. You're not alone'?"

The ability to empathize with others and to reach out a hand goes far in this world.

The so-called "Real World" doesn't have to have those ominous overtones.

You are all now equipped with new skills, new credentials, and a better understanding of the world you live in.

Take those skills and that understanding and apply them to your career and your personal life.

And during these challenging times, when folks seem to spend more time talking "at" one another instead of "to" each other -- don't forget to listen,

and use your empathy to make “the real world” easier for another person, or to improve someone else’s reality.

I’m reminded of a story:

Two men are sitting in bar. The first man says, “You know, I have a dog that can walk on water.” The second man looks at him in disbelief and says, “prove it!”

So the two men go off into the woods to hunt for ducks. With the dog and shotguns in hand, they fire at the ducks. The ducks fall to the earth and land in a pond. The dog runs to retrieve the ducks and low and behold he walks across the water.

In amazement, our second man asks if he can borrow the dog. The following day, the man, along with a group of friends goes out hunting. Yet, he decided not to tell any of his friends about the dog’s special talent.

All throughout the day, the hunters, armed with their shotguns and their retrieving dogs, aim – shoot – and have their dogs retrieve. In every case, the dogs ran to the pond, doggy paddled and retrieved the dogs. Each time, our one special dog “walked on the water.”

By the end of the day, our hunter realized that none of his friends had commented on the amazing feat his dog had performed. Finally, he turns to a friend and says, “So, did you notice anything about my dog?” His friend replies, “Well, I didn’t want to embarrass you. But that dog of yours, he can’t swim!”

It’s easy to complain and to focus on the negative - what’s not going right....yet if one just looks around, one might be amazed about all the good and wonderful things happening around them – about the people “walking on water.” Today, with graduate degree in hand, each of you is now equipped to walk on water.

CONGRATULATIONS!