

**SCSU Graduate Commencement
CHARGE TO THE GRADUTES
December 16, 2016
President Joe Bertolino**

Good evening, everyone!

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

This event is a chance for us to pause during this very busy season, and to recognize and honor the work of our graduates.

Having begun my tenure as Southern's 12th president in July of this year, today's commencement ceremonies are serving as my introduction to this most cherished of academic institutions, Southern-style.

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.

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.

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.

Last week, as you probably heard, U.S. Astronaut John Glenn passed away, at the age of 95.

John Glenn personified the concept of lifelong learning – and doing.

Some of you may have been around in the early 1960s when Glenn, as a 40-year-old astronaut, in the earliest days of the U.S. space program, became the first American to orbit the Earth.

He was also just the third American -- and the fifth human being -- in space.

It’s hard to imagine now just what a big deal his flight around the Earth was in 1962.

It took place in the context of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the two nations were competing against each other in the so-called “space race.”

Space flight was relatively new, and risky.

As the first American in orbit, Glenn instantly became a national hero and was celebrated with a ticker-tape parade in New York City.

Now fast-forward from 1962 to 1998, when John Glenn, at the age of 77, became the oldest person to fly in space, when he spent nine days aboard the shuttle Discovery — for science.

Between the time when he orbited the earth in 1962 and returned to space aboard the Discovery, he served in the U.S. Senate for four six-year terms, representing his home state of Ohio.

Before his career as an astronaut and in the Senate, Glenn was a highly decorated Marine who flew 59 combat missions in the South Pacific during World War II,

and 90 combat missions during the Korean War.

He remained in the military through the 1950s, and earned the Distinguished Flying Cross five times.

This was a person who did much in the service of his country, and who accomplished a great deal in his lifetime.

When he passed away last week, news stories about Glenn invariably spoke about him as “an American hero.”

That’s a phrase we hear tossed around a lot, but with a person like Glenn, I think it a truly legitimate assessment – but maybe not for the reasons you might think.

Author Francis French, who has written on the space program's early days, said of Glenn, "I think he will be remembered as an actual hero at a time when heroes are often called heroes, but are not."

What makes someone a [quote] “actual” hero?

In a radio interview, Nick Taylor, who helped John Glenn write his memoirs and knew him well, said that [quote] “the reason John Glenn was special was because he never acted like a hero. . . . He never acted special or empowered or in any way removed from the average person. . . even though he was certainly a true American hero.”

This notion of a humble hero – one who has done great things but neither expects nor desires adulation for his accomplishments – has stayed with me.

It enlarges our sense of what it means to be a hero.

John Glenn was a hero to our nation, sure, for his service, his courage, and his sacrifice.

And he didn’t rest on his laurels – his space flight at age 77 showed that, throughout his long life, he remained curious and dedicated to making a contribution to science.

But to me, the idea of his modesty, and the fact that his actions were motivated not by a need for recognition but by real commitment to his passions and to service – this is the essence of his heroism.

And what’s great about this kind of heroism is that it can be universal.

Each one of us -- moved by a spirit to serve, or to contribute to a body of knowledge, or just to make a difference – is capable of being a hero.

I truly believe that possessing an attitude of service towards others – and acting on that attitude – makes one a hero.

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

The label “hero” doesn’t really matter, but the concept does.

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 John Glenn -- the humble hero -- and 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.