

SCSU Graduate Commencement
CHARGE TO THE GRADUTES
May 23, 2019
President Joe Bertolino

Are we feeling good? Excited!

Welcome to Southern's graduate commencement ceremony.

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

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. (Thank them)

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 helped you get through.

Those of us who were fortunate to hear Olympic champion Michael Phelps speak on campus in March heard his story of resilience in the face of some major life setbacks.

Phelps was here on this very stage as this year’s speaker in the Fusco Distinguished Lecture series.

Speaking before a rapt audience, this most successful and decorated Olympian of all time shared stories of his swimming career and his personal life.

Just to refresh your memory -- Phelps won 28 career medals, including 23 gold, highlighted by a world record eight gold medals at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

He competed in his first Olympics in 2000 in Sydney at age 15, and retired from professional competition after winning five golds and one silver at his 5th Olympics in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

Astonishing.

On paper, he doesn't sound like a person who encountered a whole lot of obstacles in his life.

If you ever saw him swim, you probably felt, like I did, that nothing could get in his way.

Well, Michael Phelps told a different story on his night here at Southern.

During a moderated conversation with sports journalist Kate Fagan, Phelps talked not only about his incredible life journey and the sacrifices he made to reach the top of the sports world, but also the difficult personal challenges that confronted him along the way.

Ever since he did a remarkably honest interview with Sports Illustrated in 2014, when he spoke for the first time publicly about his struggle with depression, Phelps has been a prominent spokesperson for mental health awareness and support.

In that interview, and in his lecture here at Southern, he shared his story of some very dark days in his life, when he wasn't sure he would be able to pull himself out of bed in the morning.

With help, he was able to return to swimming, and to find a brighter future,

and he has continued to tell his story and encourage others to seek help when they experience struggles with their mental health.

He said that being able to talk openly about his depression made him feel like a weight had been lifted from him.

Phelps' message was a timely one.

Student mental health is a challenging issue facing higher education.

And with Southern's commitment to access, social justice, and empowering lives through higher education, we recognize the need to prioritize mental health.

In speaking with a group of students from Southern's swim team before the lecture, Phelps told the students that "living your best life is the most important thing you can do. And that includes asking for help."

Learning to ask for help when you need it can be difficult.

But Phelps' example shows us that his ability to ask for help, and receive help, allowed him to go on to achieve amazing things.

So yes, resilience is important if we're going to succeed at anything, as we navigate the twists and turns of life,

But turning to others for support is also a critical component of any successful enterprise.

We need each other to be able to achieve anything great.

And 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 –

Reaching out to help others is part of the fabric of this university.

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.

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.

In other words, like Michael Phelps -- who used his own experience with adversity to help others –

You can 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.

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

Another distinguished visitor to our campus this year – the presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin – quotes Eleanor Roosevelt in her latest book, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*.

As a young girl, Goodwin writes, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote in an essay at school, “The surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others.”

Goodwin’s book is mostly about Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon B. Johnson, and the qualities they shared that enabled them to overcome hardships and obstacles and go on to become great leaders.

These qualities were, says Goodwin -- ambition, resilience, and a sense of moral purpose.

In her book she shows that each of these presidents not only worked through great personal adversity, but also learned from it, emerging as more empathetic leaders who were driven to reach out to others.

Essentially, “to seek happiness for others,” to quote Mrs. Roosevelt.

Folks, that's really what it's all about.

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 world easier for another person.

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

Remember to always look for opportunities to give of yourself.

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.

There is a great story about the snowflake in which a field mouse asked a wise owl – what is the weight of a snowflake? "Why nothing more than nothing!" answered the owl.

The mouse went on to tell the owl about the time he sat on a branch and counted each snowflake until the number was exactly 3 million, 471 thousand, 952. Then with the settling of the very next flake – CRACK. The branch suddenly snapped, tumbling the mouse and the snow to the ground. "Humph...such was the weight of nothing," said the mouse.

So, the next time you think your contributions, your acts of charity, your works of justice, your gifts of love, and your “intentional kindness” are nothing, think again! They all add up, allowing great things to happen.

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

Go out and do good.

Remember Southern, come visit and know we are proud of you.

Congratulations.