

Hastings College, Hastings, Nebraska
Commencement Address - May 16, 2015
Ambassador (Ret.) Jeanine Jackson

Thank you, so very much, ladies and gentlemen, for your kind and warm welcome.

President Jackson, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, fellow alum, parents, family members, and the fabulous Hastings College graduating class of 2015: Good Morning! I am honored to join you on this beautiful campus where I, too, graduated.

I thank you for the honorary degree conferred upon me today. And I am particularly pleased to have received this honor from President Jackson... *no relation to me*, but a fellow Hastings alum who epitomizes leadership. President Jackson knows that it's all about people -- and here at Hastings he knows...that it's all about students.

It's been a long time since my own graduation, yet I remember so much about it ...my classmates, my friends, and the thrill of achievement -- and finally... receiving that precious degree.

I know that you -- the class of 2015 -- will leave Hastings with many lasting memories... you will remember the Boar's Head Dinner, Academic Showcase, the new and exciting science center, wifi's introduction on campus, and how you shared with roommates, your happiness and your sorrows .

You will remember the January program...many of you experienced international travel to the outback of Australia, the clear waters of Fiji, and the cultural mecca of Spain.

You will look back on sports victories, and exhilarating choir concerts, and the excitement of theatre productions. You will carry with you lessons learned from being a part of campus organizations. You won't forget the Bronco fight song ... And you'll never forget your awesome professors.

But most meaningfully, you'll always draw on the education that you received at one of our nation's premier institutions.

Education is transformative. Education is also a privilege. A privilege, which far too many people, dream of having, but will never experience.

When I began thinking about what I might say to you on this very important morning in your life, after you have spent most of the night celebrating –I had to look no further than this college's motto - “Hastings does that” and its Mission: “Hastings graduates caring students who will thrive as citizens of their local and global communities.”

The Hastings College mission has resonated with me throughout my public service career – both as soldier and as diplomat. Being educated...and being educated at this wonderful institution – isa privilege.

And with that privilege, Graduates, you take on obligations and responsibilities.

Today, I would like to suggest to you what I believe to be the four greatest of those responsibilities.

First, and most important.... *is the responsibility you have.... to yourself.*

You have a responsibility to **FIND WHAT YOU LOVE DOING AND WHAT YOU DO WELL.**

Boniface Mwangi, the courageous activist and the voice of his people in Kenya, expresses finding your passion this way:

“There are two most powerful days in your life: the day you're born, and the day you discover WHY.”

And...to find YOUR WHY may take several tries.

I first majored in church music, then music education, then art education, then I became an Army Officer, and only after all that, did I finally find what I was best at and loved doing.....being a diplomat and representing the United States in foreign lands, while managing large organizations, leading talented people, and embracing other cultures.

As a diplomat I often drew from my experience in Hastings campus organizations and on academic work.

But it was the liberal arts that gave me the biggest boost in life, especially music and art. Everywhere I have lived, I have made music a major part of my life – whether managing the Hong Kong Bach Choir, playing for an operetta in Saudi Arabia or in a jazz festival in Burkina Faso, directing a church choir in Baghdad, or dancing with village women in Kenya.

These experiences bring back more fond memories and jump started more friendships than any job I ever filled.

And art – I sculpted bronze in Burkina Faso after melting down defunct, French colonial era water meter housings over an open wood fire to obtain liquid bronze at 950 degrees. During my time as an art student in the old Carnegie Library building, I could never have dreamed of sculpting, using centuries old, and dangerous techniques, in the middle of West Africa. But Hastings prepared me to be agile, resilient, and to get the job done!

While speaking of art, I would like to take this opportunity to mention another art student, Jackson Dinsdale, not only a great artist, but a visionary, who believed in the future of Hastings College.

Upon Jackson Dinsdale's passing, his parents, along with generous students, made his vision a reality – an art center that will further enhance the reputation of Hastings as a premier liberal arts college. Hastings helps you to find what you love doing...and Hastings helps you to care, just like Jackson Dinsdale cared for artistic expression and Hastings College.

Now, Your Second Responsibility: **LISTEN TO ALL SIDES!**

It is obligatory for an educated person, particularly, one lucky enough to have attended a liberal arts college, *to listen to all sides*.

Given the diversity of people, culture and opinions, in the United States, one might think this comes to us naturally. But it doesn't. It requires dedication and practice.

My first travel outside the U.S. was during the January term. Dr. and Mrs. Shiffler took us to the Soviet Union and Communist Eastern Europe. Mind you, up until then, I had barely been out of Wyoming so that trip was an eye opening introduction to the world. After that, I never stopped traveling, learning and appreciating, other cultures and other views.

As a diplomat I learned that it takes a great deal of courage and honesty, to examine my opinions, to attack my prejudices, to stay open...and not revert, to the false comfort of a life... without questions.

There is nothing wrong with a passionate opinion, but when you think you are absolutely right, talk with someone who disagrees.

Empathy is a key to understanding. Compromise is a key to progress, and often, -- to happiness.

Listen to, and consider, all sides...Hastings prepared you for that...

Your Third Responsibility – **BE OPTIMISTIC.**

Hastings taught you and me to be responsible citizens and to thrive in our communities. To do so, we must envisage progress and work toward improving our towns, our country and the world.

As a diplomat, I served in countries at war. I served in countries that are among the richest in the world. And I have served in countries, that are the poorest.

I served where pregnant women have to bring their own candle to provide enough light for them to give birth in a clinic. I have served where girls are denied education.

I'd like to tell a short story about optimism. In Malawi where I last served as Ambassador, A Peace Corps volunteer told me that, at the high school where she taught math and science, the girls weren't coming to school. It was because, during the many mile walk to and from the regional school, girls had been raped. The village chief, a rather progressive one, told her that he had an idea...to build a girls hostel next to the school.

He had the labor and the land but he needed money to buy materials. We guided him to apply for what we called The Ambassador's self-help small grant. The hostel was built and I attended the opening ceremony. The girls were thrilled, the fathers exceedingly proud and the mothers danced up a storm. But the boys...the boys sang a hilarious rap song asking me next time to do something good for the boys. I cut the ribbon and entered the roomy hostel. The girls didn't seem to mind that beds hadn't been installed, blankets on the concrete floor were fine. What mattered is that they now had a safe place and the privilege of an education and a future.

Everywhere I have been in the world, I saw that human beings are naturally optimistic and resilient, and they share fundamental aspirations.

They want to think and worship freely. They want to educate their children. And they long for dignity.

Your Fourth Responsibility: **SERVICE**

I know that I am surrounded by students who have already embraced service...Hastings has taught you to serve.

And while you help others, you will be helping yourselves. I admire those of you who have given your talent and time to the local community through so many service organizations and projects.

I'd like to share with you today, A little about the concept of service in other parts of the world.

The U.S. Department of State – my employer – works to advance the concept of service. Each year, the Department of State, brings thousands of promising citizens of other countries to America, to experience aspects of our culture, and then return to their countries to apply what they observed – be it democracy, the arts, commerce, education, science or other areas.

I had the privilege of knowing many of those who traveled here from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia; many told me that while they learned a lot about their area of expertise, their most important takeaway was the American sense of volunteerism, of service. It is a concept not well developed in many countries.

During my two Ambassadorships in Africa, I made it a point to promote volunteerism and often quoted from President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address: “Ask NOT what your country can do for you, ask what YOU can do for your country.”

To my delight, I subsequently heard Presidents of countries where I have served, use the same quote to mobilize their citizens.

America is an example. And you – as an HC grad – will be a great example. And you will serve in many ways, because Hastings College has inculcated service into your DNA. “Hastings does that...”

During the last few years I have spoken to thousands of students – at commencements of the African Bible College; at a mountain-top Presbyterian university in Malawi; and to hundreds of promising young Africans who participated in a U.S. program to develop them as future leaders of their continent.

I have sworn in hundreds of American Peace Corps Volunteers, who served in remote villages of Africa - villages without water or electricity.

And I realized, as I prepared to speak here, that what I said to them was little different from what I am advising you.

We, with all of our broad aspirations, are really... very similar.

And lastly – when I asked some of my diplomatic colleagues what closing advice should I include in my remarks to you – they told me to tell you to just... **“be nice.”** Because, when you get down to it, one person can make a difference, but many, working together, and being nice about it, can make a world of difference.

For example, in Malawi, when there is something heavy to carry, it is balanced on a person’s head. But what to do when it is too big or heavy for one person? Teamwork!

A Malawian proverb I often used to energize people in rural villages – and occasionally at high levels of government – goes like this in the Chichawa language: Mutu umodzi susenza denga. In English that would be “One person’s head cannot carry the house.”

Indeed, teamwork is of value to us all.

Graduates of Hastings College -- Class of 2015. Congratulations!

You leave Hastings to join the ranks of a privileged, educated, world community. Bear in mind your responsibilities: find your passion, listen to all sides, be optimistic and ...be in service to others.

And wherever you go in the world...be nice!

Thank you.
