

**Commencement 2010**  
**Remarks to the Graduates**  
**By Joseph M. Torsella**

Chairman Remick, President Hirsch, faculty and administration of Rosemont College, and – most of all – graduates of the class of 2010: congratulations! And thank you for giving me the privilege and honor of talking with you today.

I am truly thrilled to be here. Because twenty-four years ago this month, I missed my own college graduation from Penn.

Like some of you, probably, I was interested in a political career, and I'd gotten myself involved in the campaign of a then-unknown former District Attorney of Philadelphia, who was at the time making his first – and very unsuccessful, as it turned out – bid for Governor of Pennsylvania.

And like all of you, I'm sure, I was interested in a career -- period. So even though Ed Rendell was 20 points behind in the polls, I thought it was somehow more important to report for duty – even low-level and virtually hopeless duty – at his campaign than to sit and listen to speeches like this at my graduation.

As I saw it, it was a simple choice between looking back and looking forward. I was young and ambitious; I didn't have time to celebrate the past. I had a future to build, and it was time to get started.

Besides, I thought, in such a big crowd, who would even notice?

The next day I ran into Sheldon Hackney, who was then the President of Penn. “Joe,” he said, “we missed you at graduation.”

“How do you know I wasn't there?” I asked, hopefully.

And I'll never forget his answer. He looked me straight in the eye and said “Oh, I figured it out when I told the 20,000 people in the audience that you were Penn's third-ever Rhodes Scholar, and asked you to stand up and be recognized by them.”

Honestly, I'm a bit embarrassed to tell you this story, but I'm sharing it both for me and for you.

For me, because I want you to know how truly special this day and this honorary degree are for me. Thanks to you, I'm getting the chance to right a wrong, and to enjoy the commencement I never had.

I even invited my mother, who is sitting in the audience, where she deserved to be 24 years ago.

Since this is kind of my graduation too, I'm planning on hitting Brownies after the ceremony, and I'll see you all there.

And I'm very sorry, Kevin Fennell, but technically this makes ME the first male graduate of the

new, coeducational Rosemont College.

But I'm sharing this story for all of you, too. Because it sums up the three messages I want to leave you with as all of you leave this wonderful school.

On that graduation day twenty-four years ago I made a big mistake. And I learned something important from it.

Let me repeat that: I made a mistake. Then I learned something.

And that's my first message to you: make some mistakes. Make plenty of little ones and, on occasion, make a doozy.

Conan O'Brian gave a graduation speech once where he said the problem with early success is that it's like a bright white tuxedo: you feel terrific when you get it, but you are desperately afraid of getting it dirty.

What he meant was that when we get a visible sign of external validation – a compliment, a first job, a diploma, an elected office – it is human nature to want to hang on to that wonderful warm feeling of approval.

So we start, bit by bit, to let go of those qualities – like the willingness to take a risk and maybe make a mistake -- that were crucial to our success in the first place.

Now every one of you should be enormously proud that you are here today. In America today, out of ten of your classmates in the freshman year of high school, only two of you made it to college graduation.

And far fewer make it to the advanced degrees that are being conferred on many of you today.

That fact should cause you and your families to burst with pride. And that fact should also, I hope, inspire at least some of you to dedicate your lives to doing something about those statistics, or your children's commencement day will feel much less hopeful than this one.

But I want to ask you to beware letting that justifiable pride in your success today get in the way of the things that will make you successful tomorrow.

Don't ever lose the guts to say things that might be unpopular but true...or the audacity to ask stupid but important questions...or the confidence to pursue a cause, or a passion, or a love with everything you have...even at the risk of looking foolish.

I would be happy for you all to believe that my standing up here today means that my life has been an unbroken string of accomplishment, as it sounded in Chairman Remick's kind introduction.

But it hasn't. I've had more wrong turns, blind alleys and outright failures than I care to remember, and the odds are you will, too.

But it is the willingness to take those occasional wrong turns – to risk our self-identity as successes – that makes us fully human. That gives us the insight to grow. And that leads us, eventually and sometimes painfully, to finding our own right and unique path.

And that is my second message to you: trust that your lives will be powerfully shaped for the better by patterns that you cannot yet see.

As I said, Ed Rendell lost that election 24 years ago. Badly. And then he went on to lose another election, for Mayor of Philadelphia one year later, and was widely considered to have no political future whatsoever.

Well, you all know how his story ended. Going back to my story, I think it's fair to say that my decision to skip graduation in 1986 had something to do with how I ended up as Ed Rendell's Deputy Mayor in 1992...or my position on the Pennsylvania School Board today.

I have seen it happen over and over again.

I lost a close election for Congress a few years ago...and I got a chance to return to the National Constitution Center for what turned out to be the most satisfying few years of my professional life. I went on a truly disastrous blind date once, one that turned out so badly the matchmaker felt so guilty he asked to arrange a second. (Why I ever let him, I don't know...) And on that second date, I met my wife and soulmate.

My point is that the best things in your life will come when you're not looking, from places you didn't expect, and often grow out of what seems – at the time – to be failure.

You can call that coincidence or fate, but here at this proud Catholic school I will tell you that I think it is the hand of a loving God at work in our lives.

And if it seems strange that I am telling you this as you leave this institution to find jobs in the middle of the worst recession in our lifetimes...well, that's why I am telling you this.

The obstacles you will face are, in fact, opportunities to chart a new and more adventurous course for yourself. If you're not offered your dream job...use your dreams to shape the job you are offered into your personal Mount Everest, and climb it.

And in those times when you're not offered any job at all...while you're waiting take your energy and your smarts and put them to work in the thousands of ways to serve that the world offers. Volunteer. Write. Be of use.

Whatever you do, trust that a combination of a determination to serve -- but a lifelong openness as to how -- will take you to places and heights you could have never even imagined.

Which brings me to my third, and perhaps most important, message. My mother is here today, but my father is not. He died 15 years ago. So he never got to see me graduate, and I never got to see the pride I know would have been in his eyes.

But he did give me an important piece of advice at the time I was leaving college, and I want to pass it along to you.

Now the story of my family and education is a lot like many of yours. Not one of my four grandparents graduated high school. One of my grandfathers ran a junkyard, and the other was an Italian immigrant who arrived in this country with – as the story goes – two brothers and one pair of shoes between them.

(The Italians have a saying: “Se non e vero e ben trovato.” Loosely translated, that means “It doesn’t really matter if it’s true, it’s still a good story.”)

My mom and my dad were the first generation in their families to attend college. And although they were successful, it took a combination of their savings, my work, financial aid, scholarships, and student loans to get me a college degree.

I still remember my mom deciding, when I was a teenager, to go back to graduate school – even while holding down a full-time job and raising a family – to pull us ahead, as a family.

And I still remember my father, a small town lawyer, sitting at the kitchen table with his yellow legal tablets, trying to fill out my financial aid forms – which were incomprehensible even then.

All of that is to say that education, advancement, striving and achievement were all part of the DNA of my family – as I imagine they are part of yours. They are part of the American DNA.

Which is why the advice my father gave me at the time of my graduation was so surprising. He told me one day that his deepest regret was that as a young adult, he spent too much time worrying about making a living and not enough about making a life.

He told me that I should spend less time achieving, and more time being human. That I should study and work a little less...and travel and explore a little more. That I should take some big risks in my 20s, because the responsibilities of my 30s and 40s would come soon enough.

Now after hearing the story I opened with, it won’t surprise you to learn that I thought I knew better, and I didn’t take that advice. But you should.

Because waiting 24 years for a proper commencement gives a person perspective. And from that perspective, here’s what I see.

I see, at long last, that it wasn’t getting that piece of paper from Penn that was so important (it eventually came, by the way, by mail) – it was celebrating the event with the people who mattered to me, while they were all around to celebrate with.

So I know I’m going to hear your parents and professors gasp as I say this, especially in these difficult economic times, but as you go forward, take my father’s advice: worry a little less about where you’re going, and enjoy a little more where you are.

This recession will not last. America is once again steering toward better times, and towards what Lincoln would have called “the better angels of our nature.”

In fact, America’s future will be, as our past has always been, a story of constant renewal, and each of you will be called to author some part of that story.

But as you answer those calls that will come to you – as citizens, as providers, as employees, employers and professionals – remember also to answer the calls that will come to your soul.

Your career and your achievements – they are a part of your life. But your family, your friends, your relationships, the people who are here with you today – they are your life.

Graduates of the Rosemont Class of 2010: I wish you not just successful careers, but successful lives.

And I am very optimistic for you. Just by being here today, you've already made a much better start than the one I made 24 years ago.

Congratulations, graduates. Live well. And thank you.