

Mike Petters
Thomas Nelson Community College Commencement Ceremony
May 11, 2005
Remarks

Thank you Chairman Monroe and thank you for your eight years of service, Reverend Willis, President Taylor and members of the faculty and administration, members of the Local College Board, family and friends, and -- of course -- the graduates.

I am very pleased – and honored – to be here this evening to pay tribute to the Thomas Nelson Community College class of 2005.

I must admit I thought long and hard about what I wanted to talk about this evening.

Commencement speeches come in all varieties.

Some are meant to impart wisdom.

Some are designed to be humorous.

Others are inspirational – while some are all of these things.

Yet, I've sat where you are more than once – and the best commencement addresses I've heard all had one thing in common.

They were short.

Yes, I'm well aware I'm one of the last things standing between you and your diploma.

And since there are several hundred of you – let's just say I don't want you to become too restless.

So first let me congratulate you on what is a very fine achievement.

Many -- if not all of you -- have made some very real sacrifices to get where you are today.

You've juggled work with school – no easy task.

You've missed the Wednesday soccer games and the Friday night after work events.

While your family slept, you stayed up into the wee hours studying.

Some of you can't name a single American Idol.

Yet, you've persevered and toughed it out.

You should be very proud.

Let me also congratulate the family and friends who are here tonight in support of the graduates.

You provided important support throughout this pursuit of higher education – financially and/or emotionally.

Success is almost always a shared victory –

and although your names may not be on the diplomas awarded this evening – you share equally in the satisfaction of a job well done.

I am personally excited for all of the graduates because I am a big fan of community colleges -- and Thomas Nelson in particular.

Maybe it's because there are dozens of you in this graduating class who work at the shipyard.

As the shipyard president, I am thrilled by your accomplishment.

I'm pleased you are using your newly acquired skills and knowledge at Northrop Grumman.

But there's more to it than that.

I'm also on the Virginia board for Community Colleges.

I became a member of this board before I became shipyard president because I firmly believe – I passionately believe -- that a strong and vibrant community college system is critical to a strong and vibrant state economy.

It's also critical to a healthy manufacturing industry.

But we can't have a healthy manufacturing industry without a skilled and educated workforce.

And where do we look to help provide much of that skilled and educated workforce?

You guessed it – community colleges.

Today, there are more than eleven hundred community colleges in the United States with nearly 12 million people enrolled.

These institutions play a vital role in our society.

The majority of our nation's healthcare professionals get their training from community colleges.

Community colleges also provide training to critical professions such as firefighters, police officers and --- shipbuilders.

At community colleges, people can continue to learn at any point in their lives.

Fast-paced technology and multiple career changes create opportunities for people to return to community colleges again and again.

Throughout our country – many people who are leaders in their fields got their start at community colleges.

People like Lt. Colonel Eileen Collins, the first woman to pilot a space shuttle.

Nolan Archibald, CEO of Black and Decker.

Naval Academy grad Ross Perot.

Calvin Klein.

I'd also like to add some shipbuilders' names to this list of people who are getting their start at a community college.

James McBride, Joshua Horner, Carrie Breeden and David Dunn are just a few of the shipyard apprentices here tonight.

Raymond Allen, Jordan Wilson and Anthony Garrett are also graduates of the design co-op program the shipyard has with Thomas Nelson.

These shipbuilders, and the many others here tonight I did not name only for the sake of brevity -- are already doing valuable work.

I look forward to continuing to work with all of you in building America's defense.

Okay graduates.

It's time now for that part in the commencement speech where I'm supposed to leave you with some sage advice.

The kind that you'll remember.

The kind of advice that during your career you'll have certain experiences that will cause you to reflect back to this evening.

You'll think to yourselves -- "I remember when that guy from the shipyard talked about this -- what was his name again?"

"This" -- my bit of advice for you as you move into your future -- has to do with effective communication.

I have nuclear training, a degree in physics, an MBA and two decades in business – yet the skill that I believe has helped me the most in my career is the ability to effectively communicate.

I believe it's important that I can talk to a room full of people about something very complex –

And when I'm finished they have a better understanding of the subject.

I've found this to be a very valuable skill.

I do this every day in my job because what we do at the shipyard is very complex – and I have to try and explain it to people who would just as soon oversimplify it.

I also think effective communication means being able to answer what is really being asked.

My dad used a tried and true quote with me and my brothers and sister.

It went, "I know you believe you understand what it was you thought I said, but I'm not sure you realize what you heard was not what I meant."

With six kids, he said this a lot.

Clear, concise communication is an asset anywhere -- and especially in the workplace.

Everyone on the planet has a boss.

Now, you can be passive about your boss and wait until your boss tells you what do to.

Or – you can constructively engage your boss to find out what's expected, how to do better and how you are doing so far.

I strongly encourage you to go for the second option.

It seems to me we have an environment in business today where bosses are sometimes reluctant to constructively engage their employees.

I believe this is an important part of good leadership.

But the best employees lean forward in that relationship.

It's easier to let someone know what they need to do -- if they ask.

It's easier to tell someone what they could do better -- if they ask.

And yes, it's easier to tell someone how they are doing -- if they ask.

Your ability to effectively communicate with your boss, with your colleagues – indeed – with anyone – will have a positive influence on your life.

But effective communication is not a natural skill for most people – it's something that must be developed.

You have to put your heart and soul into learning how to communicate well.

You have to work at it and practice the art of communication like you would if you were a painter or a musician -- or even a shipbuilder.

Most people who master the art of communication do so over time.

They learn that words have the power to inspire

- to motivate
- to persuade
- to sell.

They spend time thinking about what they want to say and how they want to say it.

They know that good communication can – and often does -- mean the difference between success and failure.

I would be remiss if I didn't add that effective communication also involves the ability to listen – really listen.

Our former president Calvin Coolidge once said, “No man ever listened himself out of a job.”

He was right.

All of you have at one time or another been in a conversation with someone where you can almost see the other person forming their response to what you are saying -- before you've even finished.

To me, that says they aren't really listening.

So effective communication has two parts – speaking and listening and both are equally important.

Another important aspect of good communication is to know when to stop talking.

So in closing, I hope you treasure this time in your life.

You have achieved something no one can ever take from you and something that is invaluable.

An education.

Congratulations and my best wishes to each and every one of you.