

GED Ceremony Remarks
Willard-Cybulski Correctional Institution
July 21, 2009

I would like to thank Warden Esther Torres and her staff, especially Pat Stamidis, for inviting me to speak with you today. I also want to thank the many people in the Department of Corrections who operate educational programs in the Connecticut prison system. Corrections actually has its own school district, with more than 12,000 student inmates served by almost 200 teachers and principals at 18 locations like Willard-Cybulski. I think they deserve a round of applause for providing the gift of education to men who are trying to make something of their lives. I also want to thank the family and friends who are here today; your love and support continues to uplift these men every day.

We are here today to honor and congratulate the men here today who have worked so hard to achieve their goal of obtaining their high school equivalency. Half a million Connecticut residents over the age of 16 do not have their high school diploma. You are no longer a part of that group. Congratulations! Instead, you are a member of a group of people who have taken the first step toward discovering the power of education — the economic power of being better positioned to get a job after returning to society, the ability to better provide for your families, the social acceptance and political freedoms that come with being educated. Most importantly, being educated gives us the feeling that we are not powerless, that we can have some control over our own lives.

So my first message to you today is simple — what you have just done is HUGE! Don't let anyone minimize it and never be embarrassed by how you have come to this point. The diploma you have earned is a sign of commitment, great sacrifice and hard work. Former Congressman Newt Gingrich once said, "Perseverance is the hard work you do after you get tired of doing the hard work you already did." I suspect you know what he is talking about.

You deserve all the credibility and respect you receive. You have a right to be proud, and you have a right to feel honored. Setting a goal and achieving it is always satisfying; in this case, achieving the goal of getting your high school diploma can be life changing!

Consider some of the other people who, like you, have made the commitment and sacrifice to get their GED. ABC news anchor Peter Jennings, actor Christian Slater and comedian Chris Rock are all GED graduates. So was the late Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy's Restaurants, and so is Ruth Ann Minner, former Governor of Delaware. Mary Lou Retton, Olympic gymnast, musician Waylon Jennings, and automotive racer Danica Patrick all got their GEDs. So did Michael J. Fox. That's good company!

Now you are thinking, 'Hey, those are all celebrities.' That's true. But they didn't begin their lives as celebrities. Many, like you and I, came from modest beginnings. And some had to find their way past huge hurdles and barriers.

Let me tell you about one of them. Ruth Ann Minner was the governor of Delaware for the past eight years and just turned over that office to her successor this past January. Forty years ago, she woke up at the age of 32 as a widow with three children; her husband had just died of cancer. She hadn't finished high school and had to work two jobs, seven days a week, to support her kids. But she decided to get her GED, just like you did. Then she started a towing company, achieving success as a businesswoman. She ended up serving in the Delaware legislature for eight years, and then Lt. Governor for two terms before being elected governor. Do you think when she woke up that morning in 1969 as a young widow without a high school

education that she dreamed of becoming the governor of her state? Probably not. But she had great potential inside her, and the will to succeed.

Let me tell you another story about someone who started in humble surroundings — me. I was born in the mountains of western Puerto Rico. When I was young, my father moved us to Newark, New Jersey, where he and my mother worked long hours in the factories. My dad told me that education was the way to escape the projects. Today, I am fortunate to be president of a great University here in Connecticut. But like most of you, I started in modest circumstances. All of us must start somewhere, and today you have started on a promising path for you and your families.

Each of you has your own personal story. You know all about hardships and stacked decks. You have made some decisions that I am sure you would like to take back if you could. But today you remind us that we do not have to let our past dictate our future.

As Martin Luther King famously noted almost 50 years ago, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” Your answer to the challenges you have faced has been to work hard and earn your GED. You have shown that how you got here matters far less than what you are doing to get out, not just to get beyond these walls, but to get beyond the life choices that brought you here. Again, today represents an important milestone in your lives and you should enjoy it for what it means for your future.

And so I have a second message for you today. While you should feel honored and proud to get this far, do not be satisfied. Others have set limits and held low expectations of you. You have shown you can do more. The chapter in your personal story that you have just written opens up all kinds of possibilities. I know some of you are already taking college courses here through Asnuntuck Community College. There are also vocational programs here, computer classes, and you even have the ability to test out of college classes while still at Willard-Cybuski.

When you get out, and some of you are only days from release, I encourage you to start expanding your horizons. Whether it’s attending a community college, getting a technical degree, or even applying to a four-year college, there is more educational opportunity out there for each of you.

Not so long ago, getting your high school diploma seemed impossible. You have proven it wasn’t. So I challenge each of you not to rest until you have exhausted your educational options. Keep learning. Keep reading books on your own. Keep growing.

You have probably already been told that inmates who get their GED while in prison typically improve their job potential when they return to society. Here are some other interesting facts. Former inmates with a GED who go on to get an associate’s degree at a community college are four times less likely to return to prison; those with a bachelor’s degree are 10 times less likely. And someone with a master’s degree? The recidivism rate for former inmates who get a master’s degree drops to zero!

I have one other message for you today. With education comes power, but also responsibility. Each of you has a niece, a nephew, a family friend, or a neighborhood kid — some young person who you can influence in a positive way. When you leave here, I want you to reach out to them, to be the difference in their lives so that they make good decisions and follow a better path than some of the paths you have taken before now. Think what a difference you can make in your own community, in your neighborhoods, in your own families.

Again, you have proved that you are winners today. You have shown that you can overcome adversity. You have won a prize that no one can take from you. Now, turn your eyes

to the future and answer my two challenges when you are able — keep learning and touch someone else with the wisdom you have gained.

I want to leave you with a poem today — the author is unknown, but the message is worth hearing.

“When things go wrong as they sometimes will;
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill;
When the funds are low, and the debts are high
And you want to smile, but have to sigh;
When care is pressing you down a bit-
Rest if you must, but do not quit.
Success is failure turned inside out;
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt;
And you can never tell how close you are
It may be near when it seems so far;
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit-
It's when things go wrong that you must not quit.”

Keep up the good work, and don't ever quit. Again, thank you for having me today and congratulations to our graduates! Have a wonderful day.