

Keynote Address
Middlesex Community College Commencement
June 5, 2008

I would like to thank President Nieves for inviting me to be with you today for Middlesex Community College's 41st commencement exercises. I am delighted to be with the Class of 2008 and their families and friends. I also am honored to share the dais with Chairman Ridley; Chancellor Herzog; Mayor Giuliano of Middletown; Trustees, and other honored guests.

I also want to acknowledge and congratulate the members of the faculty and staff for the guidance and support that they have given this year's graduates. (to graduates: Help me say "thank you" to all those who have helped you successfully reach this magnificent achievement today!

I understand that there are 275 graduates today, preparing for careers ranging from criminology to early childhood education, veterinary technology, and accounting. I also know that many of you are planning to transfer this fall to a four-year university or college. Regardless of the path you have chosen, each of you has come to a crossroads.

Today is both a day of closure and a day of beginnings, but it is principally a day of celebration. Therefore, I am going to keep my remarks brief to ensure that most of our time is focused on today's graduates, as it should be. But I do have a few thoughts to share with you.

First, you are special. Yes, you are smart, you are educated, you have a great deal to contribute. But as Michelangelo once noted, "If you knew how much work went into it, you wouldn't call it genius." The Class of 2008 knows work. Most of you have juggled a job with your studies; in some cases, a full-time course load and a full-time job. Many of you are also raising families, sometimes by yourself. You have made huge sacrifices to be here today. You make all of us proud.

You are also special because you are joining an esteemed group of community college graduates. Each of them emerged from the classrooms and corridors of their colleges just like you to become leaders in their fields — people like Walt Disney, Tom Hanks, Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine, Calvin Klein, and Former EPA director Carol Browner. You are also part of the fastest growing sector of higher education. Fifty years ago, there were fewer than 900,000 community college students in 400 colleges. Today, 12 million students attend almost 1,200 community colleges. In the 12 community colleges in Connecticut, we enroll almost 100,000 students. The student body at Middlesex is 2,200 people strong, and you are part of a 40-year history of Middlesex graduates. When all is said and done, you join an elite group of people with a college degree — only 1/3rd of all U.S. adults can say what you can say today: "I am a college graduate."

You are also special because the work you will perform in society is critical to our nation. More than half our healthcare professionals — nurses, radiology technicians, and others — are educated at colleges like Middlesex. And almost 80 percent of our nation's first responders — firefighters, EMTs, and police officers — receive their training at a community college.

My second thought for you today is this — you live in a new world very different from that of previous generations. There was a time in our nation's history when

community colleges were unfairly given short change: “You can always go to a community college” was a too-familiar refrain. You went to a community college to get a terminal degree, and just enough education to find a job. The presumption, false as it may have been, was that if you were good enough to go to a four-year school, you already would have done so. Times have changed. A substantial portion of this year’s class is enrolling next fall in a four-year university. Others will follow, if not immediately. Last year, more than 3,000 Connecticut community college graduates transferred to a four-year school, one-third of them enrolling in a Connecticut State University like Eastern. With the transfer agreements now in place between the CSU System and Connecticut’s 12 community colleges, more students will be able to move seamlessly from an associate’s degree to working towards a bachelor’s degree.

The world is different than in decades past in another way. When I was your age, the most important part of your television was the antenna, personal computers were a dozen years away, and a CD was something you put in your bank account if you were lucky. Today, technology has created a world of constant change — at the office, in the home, and in between. The investment that Connecticut has made in math, science, and technology education at Middlesex and the State’s other community colleges has put you in a great position to respond to this world of change. Don’t stop now. Regardless of what your immediate plans are, I want all of you to make a commitment to continuing your education. Whether it’s a one-day workshop on Microsoft Office sponsored by your employer, a short course on organizational management, an online course, or an additional certification, keep learning.

The final thought I have for you, and the most important one, is that you are needed, and not just for your talent and abilities in your chosen career. In addition to finding a good job and supporting yourself and your family, you have a chance to help fix some of the problems we face as a society. There is a challenge out there with your name on it, whether it’s helping out at your local elementary school, volunteering on a Habitat for Humanity project, or inventing a new alternative fuel source. There is a team somewhere that needs you to complete its mission.

There are many people I could hold up to you today as models for making your own personal contribution to the world. Martin Luther King. Robert Kennedy. Cesar Chavez. Nelson Mandela. Of course, our tendency is to say, “There was only one Martin Luther King, only one Nelson Mandela.” That is true, but you don’t have to be a world leader to make a difference.

Anthony Friedmann, in his book, “Writing for the Visual Media,” describes the classic movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life” starring Jimmy Stewart, and declares that the moral of the movie “... is that each individual life counts and affects the lives of others. In other words, the universe is affected by our individual existence. Individual destiny is universal destiny.”

Yes, one person can make an enormous difference even if it is in a local setting. I would like to tell you an amazing story about a woman who demonstrated what one person can do when they feel moved to try to help others.

Hadley Denning was a young woman from Maine who was visiting Guatemala 11 years ago. She came upon a situation that she simply could not walk away from. More than 6,000 people were living in or near the 35-acre city dump in Guatemala City, rummaging daily through the rubble and decay to find items they might use or sell. The

methane gas was so bad it turned children's hair red-orange. Dogs and gangs patrolled the alleyways.

For the next eight years, Denning worked tirelessly to bring hope and sustenance to the people of the dump. She became known as "El angel del Basurero" — the "angel of the dump" — and created an organization called Safe Passage to bring health services, education, and other support to the people she had given her life to. She established a school in an abandoned church — it now serves 500 children. A residential home has been built on the edges of the dump, and the number of people living in squalor is down to 1,500. Everyone who was touched by this amazing woman will never forget her, and college students throughout the Northeast continue to find their way to Guatemala to continue her vision.

One person can make all the difference. Yet as much as one person can have an amazing impact on the world, when we bring teams of people together, even greater good can occur. In the words of the late Senator Robert Kennedy, "Each time a man stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

You are moving walls on your own campus. Student and faculty leaders at MCC are providing free eye care, traveling as far away as Mexico to bring your services to those in need. Your efforts in the area of sustainable energy and the environment are equally impressive. I also have read of a number of initiatives here at MCC that support cross-cultural understanding and world peace. And those of you who can run 5,000 meters are racing in support of student scholarships. Today's graduates already have experiences in serving others. It is time to do more.

Developing a life-saving drug, producing a Broadway play with life's deep meaning, educating our young people, or passing a piece of legislation are other examples of people working together, opportunities that are all within your reach.

As you go out into the workforce and forge your own way, find new ways to serve your local community, be it as a Little League coach, a member of the school board, or serving food at a homeless shelter. If you go into business, strive to become a great leader and manager. If you go into healthcare, I challenge you to provide the best care you can to your patients. If you go into education, work to inspire your students. If you go into technology, create ideas that provide useful and valuable innovations. Whatever you do and wherever you go in life, give it your all.

You have private lives with your families, and I wish you prosperity and good health. You have or will soon have professional lives and I wish you the very best in realizing your career aspirations. I also hope all of you will have public lives, sharing the American dream and the promise of a better nation with the people sitting with you today.

As you make your own special contributions, I hope you remember your days at Middlesex Community College and this special day, June 5, 2008, when you embarked on the next chapter in your life. Be proud of today — you are special. Be ready for tomorrow — you have been well prepared. Be willing to roll up your sleeves — there is work ahead for all of us. Good luck and God bless.