

Washington State University- Tri-Cities Commencement Address Speech
May 15, 2009
By Rufus M Friday- President & Publisher- Tri-City Herald

Thank you Chancellor Carwein and President Floyd.

Members of the Class of 2009.

I have good news for you.

I know the only thing standing between you and your diplomas is me.

I will be brief.

As I look in your eyes, wondering where you will be 20 years from now, I think back at what happened here 20 years ago. 1989.

1989 was, to borrow a phrase, a very big year in the Tri-Cities and in world history.

That's the year this school was founded – at least as a branch campus of Washington State University.

There had been a consortium of schools holding college classes on this campus before then. But it was relatively small.

In Europe, the Berlin Wall, the last great visible symbol dividing democracy from communism in Eastern Europe, came down.

And believe me; in 1989 no one on either side of The Wall felt that was likely to happen in their lifetimes.

In Asia, there was a gathering of about 100,000 Chinese civilians in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. They were campaigning for the political freedoms we take for granted everyday – freedom of speech, peaceful assembly, freedom of the press and the right to petition the government.

You’ve no doubt seen the iconic picture of the young man demonstrating for liberty facing down a Chinese military tank.

Closer to home, in the Pacific Northwest, The Exxon Valdez, an oil container ship, ran aground in Alaska’s Prince William Sound. The incident triggered a massive oil spill from the tanker and major environmental disaster.

Microsoft introduced Microsoft Office for the first time. It employed 4,037. It now employs more than 95,000 worldwide.

The Oscar for Best Picture of the Year went to “Driving Miss Daisy.”

The most popular program on television was “The Cosby Show,” starring Bill Cosby and The Grammy for best single of the year went to Bette Midler for “Wind beneath My Wings”.

And in 1989, there came a culmination, here in the Tri-Cities, of a series of actions that propelled our part of the state to a whole new level.

It was a development that would change our community, in a good way, forever. The Tri-City campus of Washington State University was founded.

On this 20th anniversary of that founding, I want to tell you a brief story of three people.

They are largely responsible for us being here today.

Theirs is almost a forgotten story, lost in the two decades of events that followed this great collaboration.

Still, it is a story you need to know and remember.

These three met with a certain air of conspiracy, even though what they were doing was not against the law.

They met in a 100 year old canning plant near downtown Kennewick.

The first was Sam Smith. He was the president of Washington State University in the 1980s and 1990s.

Sam was – is – a big, friendly man, with a passion for education. Sam also had a strong commitment to the idea that the people who pay taxes to support their colleges and universities have as much a right as students to have access to their benefits.

Sam believed the libraries of Washington's public universities should be open to every citizen of the state.

“They paid for the books; they should get to read them if they want,” he liked to say.

Under his administration, any book in WSU libraries that circulated to students was available by mail to any library patron in the state. He may not have invented that concept but it was like words from the Gospel to him.

The second of these conspirators, if I may call them that, was Kelso Gillenwater.

Gillenwater was the 42-year-old publisher of the Tri-City Herald at the time.

Kelso was a good writer, a clear thinker and a man with a driving personality.

Those who knew Kelso well, tell me he may not always have been right, but he was always Kelso.

Just as others might say the boss is not always right, but he or she is always the boss.

The third leg of this trio was the most famous of the lot.

His name is Booth Gardner.

Before Christine Gregoire, before Gary Locke and before Mike Lowry, Booth Gardner was governor of our state.

Usually it was Sam Smith and Kelso Gillenwater who met in the 100 year old canning plant.

For those of who you have not figured it out by now, the old canning plant was the offices of the Tri-City Herald.

When Booth Gardner made an “official” visit to the Herald’s Editorial Board at the canning factory building, he would come in the state plane, be escorted by armed Highway Patrol troopers and be subjected to sometimes rehearsed questions from the editors.

Often, however I am told, when the world thought him safely in the governor's mansion in Olympia, Booth Gardner would come to town some evenings, unheralded and unescorted.

He and Kelso would talk for hours about creating the Tri-City campus in that old 100 year old cannery building.

The region was ready, they reasoned, for a campus we could call our own.

Sometime the next day Kelso would announce to the editorial page editor that the Herald needed to write yet again on the benefits of a branch campus of WSU to the state of Washington, higher education in general and the Tri-Cities in particular.

Sunday after Sunday, perhaps more quickly and more often if the Legislature was in session, the Tri-City Herald was writing about the virtues of a branch campus.

The 'conspiracy' worked! And here we are today.

A recently born 4-year university designation, a student body of over 1,300, more than 5,000 alumni, a campus spanning 200 acres on the Columbia River and some of the top college professors, scientists and administrators in the nation. Not bad for 20 years of work.

Now while all this was going on, there were some young people like you who were just beginning to get their careers moving.

Vicky Carwein, Elson Floyd and I were in very different places.

We were 20 years younger than we are now – about the same age as some of you in the audience today.

Chancellor Carwein was the Associate Dean of the College of Health Sciences at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

President Floyd was an Assistant Vice President for Student Services and Special Programs for the University of North Carolina System in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

And I was a circulation metropolitan supervisor at the News & Observer Publishing Company in Raleigh, North Carolina. I was up mornings around 3 a.m. directing the managers and carriers who delivered the newspaper.

Now the three of us are here addressing you distinguished graduates.

Where will each of **you** be on Tuesday, May 15, 2029?

Who knows, but I can tell you this...

Your mindset will determine the answer.

We are all aware the economy isn't bright right now.

But you may rely on the fact that, that will change.

It has always changed.

A friend of mine told me that being successful in today's environment is about not waiting for the storms to pass, but to learn how to dance in the rain.

As to me, I was born in South Carolina, to good, industrious parents who spent their working lives working hard... always working.

They lived through the Great Depression.

Everyone talks about the Great Depression on television and in newspapers these days, but none of us has seen anything like the hardships our parents and grandparents endured.

Neither of my parents finished high school.

They worked all their lives in the textile plants of the Carolinas, under the strictures of the Old South.

They never thought about college for themselves, but it was their determination that their children would. I know some of you can relate to that.

There are nine of us, and we did go to college.

All nine of us.

My brothers and sisters have successful, fulfilling lives.

Home was – and in a family sense, still is the South– in Gastonia, North Carolina to be exact, where our mother Ruby still lives.

When I was a child, in the 1960s, the Ku Klux Klan threw a fire bomb onto our front lawn. You see, my sister was the first black to integrate the town's high school cheerleading team.

I can remember – in fact, I cannot forget – that I was myself as a kid chased home some nights, from the Salvation Army Boys Club in my hometown by members of the Klan, who were determined, I wouldn't succeed.

My point is: you can become successful regardless of where you start, as long as you've got it in your head to succeed.

Now I'm here in the Northwest. It's been quite a trip.

I made it in spite of the limitations.

So can each of you.

By having the commitment, values, accountability, creativity and integrity to do so.

I am proud to be a part of the Tri-Cities community.

We are a community rich in cultural and ethnic diversity and we are focused on the future.

I'm also very proud to be part of the Tri-City Herald family.

It gives me a rare chance to help make a difference through our daily service to our communities.

The Tri-City Herald is older than I am, but at its start someone with my skin color would almost certainly have entered the building through the warehouse, not the front door.

Society and the Herald have gotten better through the years.

I stand before you as publisher of the local newspaper, with the keys to the front door in my pocket.

So, distinguished Class of 2009.

Your experiences over the next 20 years will be, I hope and expect, filled with more successes than setbacks.

In an age when computer empires started in garages, it's not to be denied that each of you has the power to succeed in ways perhaps not yet dreamed of.

Maybe you could find a 100-year-old cannery someplace, and start making grand plans to change this community or the world.

This is a great day for you ... the graduates of 2009.

Congratulations! Good luck! Stay focused! Stay strong!

And...**Go COUGARS!!!** Thank you.