

Lt. Gen. Mary Legere '82 2013 Commencement Speech

Thursday, May 23, 2013

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Commencement Address 2013, LTG Mary A. Legere, US Army - May 18, 2013

President Huddleston, distinguished guests, esteemed faculty, family, friends, and graduates, good morning and thank you for allowing me to be here with you today, to represent the alumni of UNH commencements past and to share in this wonderful celebration for all of you.

I am deeply honored to be here, to join such a talented class of graduates, although I must admit I was depressed to realize that I graduated 100 years before most of you were born.

I must also admit when I saw the envelope with the UNH logo, I reflexively panicked, as all alums do. Because after 31 years in the Army, 23 jobs, 18 moves, 5 continents, 1 husband, 1 name change, I thought—surely, I had finally outrun the UNH registrar's late parking and library fees statute of limitations. But apparently not.

For those of you who are laughing, I have to tell you this: as an officer with three decades of experience in the intelligence business, had our registrar pitched in with the hunt for Bin Laden or Jimmy Hoffa, we might have found both sooner. Know this about our registrar—they are relentless, and will hunt you to the end of the earth if you have any late fees. I speak from experience.

Now once I actually opened the envelope and realized it was an invitation, my second thought was actually a little concern for you and the quality of your commencement experience. It has long been a tradition here at UNH to have a poet laureate, a former president, an economist with one really large eyebrow, or an actress to provide a profound speech that lasts at least two hours. In other words, there's some usual suffering that is supposed to go with this ceremony. It's part of our tradition, and your student fee.

My 1982 commencement experience was a case in point. There we were, right where you are, mostly sober, but all collectively dying of heat stroke in the same splendid robes which I see have been generously passed to you. Our speaker that year was the Honorable Paul Volker, who at the time was the chairman of the Federal Reserve. A great American who was doing remarkable work on curbing historic rates of inflation but, not exactly Bono or the Bee Gees, or the definition of a good time. I honestly don't remember anything that he said, except at some point the president had to get up and say hey, listen up, you are graduating, and you really ought to know something about inflation. At least as my memory serves.

So naturally I thought you might deserve someone a little duller or more substantive than I am prepared to be. When I expressed some concerns to President Huddleston and the commencement committee, they said not to worry. They had a different idea. They like you.

So they told me to get up here, tell you how wonderful you are, how much they'll miss you and that the world is waiting, but so are your reservations at the Dairy Bar and Newicks, so follow that with some advice on how to take over the world and sit down. In other words, minimal suffering. So that's the reason I am here, and I am thus thrilled to be here for a kinder, gentler, less torturous commencement experience. And I am sincerely proud of each of you!

Now before I go much further, I would like to ask you to join me in acknowledging a few special groups. First I'd like to ask the men and women from UNH Air Force and Army ROTC programs who were commissioned this week to please stand to be recognized. And then I would like to ask the veterans from the class and those veterans attending as family members or faculty to stand as well. And now I'd like to ask our graduates and audience to join me in a round of applause for these great Americans. And to all of our newly commissioned and veterans, please accept my thanks on behalf of all the service members around the world for your service and decision to serve your country.

And as for the rest of this magnificent class, congratulations to you as well! As you sit there, surrounded by your best friends, I hope you are capturing the beauty of the campus, the splendor of this ceremony and the pride and relief of your parents as you celebrate the end of this important chapter in your life.

I know each of you has a million memories, and I sincerely hope you are proud of all you have accomplished. Because today, no matter what your GPA was, or how many times you had to retake Animal Foods and Man, you are now all college graduates!

And today, you join the less than one percent of the people on this planet who are fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to attend a great college, to be part of a wonderfully diverse student body, and to build upon this university's legacy of producing so many positive leaders in so many professions, and sending caring and principled people out into communities across our country to do good work and to make a difference.

So congratulations to all of you...on behalf of all of us old alums. We are so proud of you. Be proud of yourselves. And as you go, be grateful to this faculty, administration, and staff who did so much to make your years here so meaningful. Be thankful always to your parents and family for their encouragement, sacrifice, and support. And be appreciative of your classmates and friends who have, by their presence and love, inspired you to discover the kind of person you'll become. These are amazing gifts. I know you appreciate them.

As for any advice that I would give you, aside from pleading with you to pay your parking fees so you can receive your diploma, I tried to imagine based on the wonderful life that I have experienced since I left school, what I would have said to the 21-year-old me sitting in the stadium, trying to figure out what the speaker was talking about, while I worried about what my future held. Like many of you, I had a plan on graduation. My plan involved earning a commission in the Army as 2LT of Military Intelligence and serving my country for at least four years while I explored the possibility of a career in intelligence or foreign service.

While the speakers droned on, I can tell you that my mind was already on its way to Fort Bragg, where I would report within 48 hours after graduation, to begin the first of what has been 31 years of active service. As fortunate as I was to be graduating and to have received my commission, I was wracked with anxiety, hoping I had what it took. First to get to North Carolina without meeting any state troopers, and then more importantly, to develop as a leader and earn the trust and respect of my soldiers.

In the 31 years since that graduation weekend, I can say that those thoughts are the same thoughts I have at the beginning of every new position. So I guess what I'd say then to that 21-year-old me and by extension to all of you, is look forward to what's ahead and don't worry so much. Accept that life will be a series of detours, unanticipated challenges, and unexpected opportunities that you must trust yourself to take.

If you have anxiety that you are not fully prepared for what's ahead, don't worry. You are not fully prepared. But you will do your best, bringing the confidence and strength you've gained in these four years here and you will ultimately will figure it all out.

And if you are worried about making mistakes, don't. You are going to make mistakes. Thousands of them. Like death and taxes, you can count on this. Accept them. Embrace them. Learn from them. And as long as no one gets hurt, learn to laugh at them while endeavoring not to repeat the same ones twice. And then drive on...because you have to know: "Success is not final... failure is not fatal...and it is the courage to continue that counts."

And when you are lucky enough like I am to find the work you enjoy—that allows you to push beyond the limits of your potential—and to work with people you admire, and to contribute to something greater than yourself, go after this with everything you have! Because this is one of the secrets of a happy life.

I hope you will gravitate toward responsibility—understanding that the more you take on, the stronger you will become, the greater your capacity, and the more opportunities that will come your way.

And remember that leadership is action... not a position. No matter what job or position you are in, you will always have the opportunity to be a principled, inclusive and enthusiastic leader. So seize this opportunity. Whether you are in sales, a teacher, a professor, a nurse, a CEO, a care giver, an associate—you can be a leader of ethical action in your workplace, in your family and in your community—someone who is regarded not just for what you accomplish but for the lives you touch, and the people you help.

There is a saying: “That we make a living by what we get, but make a life by what we give.”

Live and embrace that idea as you leave this university.

And as you embark on your professional and personal journey for fulfillment, know the story of your life and who you are will begin to be written as soon as you drive off this campus. While the major paragraphs and chapters may be undefined, your character, values, commitment to the community as a leader will either be evident... or will be absent.

So think about this, and what you want people to say about you and the leader you are, and what you mean to your community - and lead your life accordingly.

In this final year here at UNH, you have all experienced the highs that come with successfully achieving your goals. And you also have, with others, experienced the incomprehensible and collective anguish of the Newtown and Boston tragedies, reeling with the rest of us at the senseless cruelty while marveling at the quiet heroism of so many ordinary people whose courage and selflessness propelled them to run toward danger. Putting the needs of others before themselves.

Through these tragedies, as is often the case, we saw man’s capacity for good, which calmed and inspired us. Instead of growing cynical, insular, or violent, we saw the best of us rise above it, and were reminded that evil cannot prevail as long as good people are willing to act.

So while you are on your road to defining who you are, I hope you will remember these ordinary citizens, some of whom were your fellow students, who ran toward danger to assist people they’d never met, saving lives, and in the process restoring our hope.

I hope you will remember Victoria Soto, the beautiful 27-year-old first grade teacher from Plaistow, N.H., who on that fateful morning of 14 December at Sandy Hook

Elementary did what she was born to do—to protect her 6-year-old students from a gunman. Hiding seven of them so that they could live and return to their parents...

In a moment of instinct...in a moment of courage...she made the difference.

I hope you will think of Specialist Ross McGinnis, a 19-year-old from Knox, Pennsylvania, a young soldier like so many of our young soldiers, in his first assignment and deployment, who was riding in the turret position of an up armored HUMMV, when a grenade was thrown into the vehicle.

Shouting a warning to his four fellow soldiers, and realizing they could not escape, he dropped down in that instant and threw himself on the grenade, sacrificing himself to save his comrades. Men who today are fathers, brothers, sons, husbands. A big-hearted young man, with an irrepressible sense of humor, Specialist McGinnis never had the chance to come to UNH.

In a moment of instinct. In a moment of courage, he made the difference. He died at 19 and was awarded a Medal of Honor. Remember him.

And think also of Carlos Arrendoondo, Steve Filoa, and UNH athletic trainer Jon Dana—who like so many in Boston found themselves rushing to rescue those who were so badly maimed, uncertain whether another explosion might take their lives, but determined to help those who were so badly wounded. In moments of instinct...and moments of courage... making the difference.

Like the sisters at Saint Charles and Cameron Lyle, and other UNH students whose selfless actions make our world a better place, we can find inspiration and role models in the most ordinary places. By their actions, these people are heroes and leaders. As so when you think about your life and the adventure you are about to begin—be inspired and worthy of these examples.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said "Service is the very purpose of life. What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us. Dare to live the life you have dreamed for yourself. Go forward and make your dreams come true."

Graduates of the UNH Class of 2013... Dare to live the life you have dreamed of. And as you do, live with integrity and purpose, find work that you love; and surround yourself with people that you respect; and in your moments of instinct and moments of courage, bring to the world and your community all the best you can contribute. Class of 2013—congratulations. I know you are going to be amazing! Go forth to do good work.

Thank You.

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