



## Syracuse University, College of Law, Commencement Address

Published: 05/21/2006

Mr. President, that has a nice ring to it. Chancellor Cantor, I travel around the country and Syracuse University is recognized as having one of the three or four most dynamic chancellors and leaders of any university. Every time I speak to Dean Arterian she is in some other part of the country recruiting some of the best law students to come here.

I'm often asked as a United States Senator by parents, as if I would know: "My child has gotten into this university or that university. Where should she go?" I say they should go to that university they can get into now and are quite certain 10 years from now they'd never be admitted. That's the place they should go. Thank you for allowing that to be my story.

Don MacNaughton, a classmate of mine and a great benefactor, he and his family, of this law school. Both of our degrees are looking much better every single solitary year.

Members of the faculty, particularly two who are still here who taught me, Professor Donnelly, who I admire greatly, and Professor Maroney, who I love because he is the only guy who ever gave me an A. I want to thank him very, very, very much. I admire Professor Donnelly more because he obviously was smarter. He did not give me an A.

Class of 2006, I want to thank you. I don't know if the Dean was lying, not that she ever would, or any Dean would, but she said I was your choice. I am flattered. I appreciate this for a reason you will not fully understand.

My dream out of high school was to play professional football. When Don MacNaughton and I graduated, we graduated on this field, before it became a dome. The speaker stood on the 50 yard line -- literally, not figuratively. Thank you for getting me into the end zone, finally. I have dreamed of this moment -- to be like Ernie Davis, Heisman Trophy Winner, 1961. I noticed the Syracuse University graduation ceremony has a musical theme this year. The undergraduates had Billy Joel, you have a saxophone player, but I'm not singing no matter what you ask me to do. There's only a few things I've learned to do and not do, and the things I've learned not to do have held me in better stead than the things I've learned to do.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me to once again join the ranks of the thousands of forgotten commencement speakers. My wife is a professor at a community college and she came home, this is not a joke, and I said how was the speaker at her commencement because she attends all the commencements like the faculty here. She said, "he was great." I asked: "was he inspiring?" She said "no, he was 12 minutes." I don't know whether I'll make that.

There is an old expression: "adversity introduces a man to himself." I would like to add that only those who

know themselves are really able to know others. Only those who come to know themselves are really able to make any real difference.

Last year, Steve Jobs gave a commencement address telling true personal stories to illustrate that point, and I want to try to do the same talking about pages in my life that have taught me lessons. I hope they'll teach you that the things you are burdened by, or that you don't expect, are likely to provide the greatest opportunity for you to succeed.

My mom, God love her, has an expression: "Joe, out of everything bad something good will come, if you look hard enough for it."

One of those pages in my life I wrote a long time ago. I was a little kid who used to stutter very, very badly. Quite frankly, I thought it was the end of the world. Every single thing I wanted to do was blocked because I stuttered.

For anyone who stutters, everyone else thinks you are not very bright. It's humiliating, it's almost totally debilitating. When you talk like that not only does your entire insides churn, but you feel rage, anger, and humiliation. You can't even get to the point of when you're a kid asking a lovely girl to go to the prom with you. I stuttered, and I thought that might be my epitaph.

Today, my colleagues kid me about quoting poetry so often, and Emerson so extemporaneously. They think it somehow came from my ardent study. It was born out of fear.

It was born out of standing in front of a mirror in my bedroom watching so that I would not have the muscles in my face contort quoting Emerson repeatedly: "Meek young men grow up in libraries," or "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." Or I would quote Yeats, teaching me how to relax my face and gain enough confidence to be able to speak.

It also made me better able to understand what the other guy is thinking. As a paper boy in grade school and high school, I had to go collect on Saturday mornings for the newspaper. It was the most frightening time of my week because I had to knock on every door, and I had to ask for them to pay the weekly cost of the paper.

In order to deal with it, I learned to anticipate what I would be asked by who ever answered the door. So I would practice what I was going to say as I walked up the sidewalk.

My next door neighbor was a bachelor. He loved the Yankees. I memorized the box score every Saturday morning before I went to his door because I knew he'd ask me. I knew I'd have something to say without making a fool of myself.

No one could have told me then when I was 13 or 15 years old that my greatest liability would turn out to be one of my greatest assets in my chosen profession.

Who would have ever thought in my neighborhood that little Joey Biden would stand before a group of distinguished faculty members, and families, and graduates of a great law school and have them all wondering when is this guy going to stop talking, rather than when is he going to talk? What also came out of

it was a genuine appreciation for how other people feel when they are burdened by something that embarrasses them. It taught me empathy, a characteristic that quite frankly, in the practice of law, allowed me to stand before juries and understand how they felt. I was better able to read the feeling of anger or sympathy they had in their faces. That was something I never learned in law school, and could have never learned by anything other than experience.

To this day, I find myself enraged when other people abuse power. To this day, I find it difficult to be silent when others who are burdened feel totally isolated.

My mother has an expression. She says, "God sends no man or woman a cross that they cannot bear." One day if you haven't already, you will learn in your own lives what I've learned in mine -- the wisdom of those words.

A second page of my life is how a guy with bad marks at Syracuse University Law School could be elected to the United States Senate at age 29.

After I graduated from this law school, I took the DC bar and did not pass it. That put the fear of God in me, to the point that for the first time in my life I studied. I studied hard. And I passed the Delaware bar given a few months later.

It was a difficult time in our nation. That was the year Dr. King was murdered, there were riots in Wilmington, Delaware, and part of the city was burned down.

The Governor was a Southern Democrat. My state was a slave state. My state was segregated by law. My state has a shameful history when it comes to civil rights. And I, as a young man having passed the bar, found myself in a situation where I joined a group of people who were trying to change the Democratic party to a more civil rights party.

Matter of fact, that year I supported a Republican candidate for Governor because the Democratic party was a Southern Democratic party. Matter of fact, that man, whose name is Russell Peterson, is now a Democrat. And he won that election.

It did an interesting thing for me. All those things you read about how Joe Biden always knew he was going to be a United States Senator -- I didn't even intend on getting involved. But I joined this group after I passed the bar. They asked me would I stand for a county council election in a Republican district. I did not want to run for office, but I ran to show the flag. And I won.

I won in a year that no other Democrat in a contested seat won in my state. As a consequence, I was appointed to a commission set up to revive the Democratic party. As a consequence of that, I got to meet every single activist Democrat.

I was elected to a four-year term, but the Republicans thought I might run someday for a statewide office, so they reapportioned me to a two-year term in a district I could not win. All of a sudden, the kid who had no intention of running for the United States Senate, none, zero, found himself in the position where he was a candidate for the United States Senate. Having been exposed to so much in so little time, I had the confidence to know what I was about to do. My point is once you make a decision, and you take a risk, and I hope you

take many, it has an interesting impact on you. You learn, as you have in law school, to have more confidence in yourself.

Up until this point in your life you have not had to make that many decisions. I don't think you have to go wandering around looking for impossible adventures, or challenges you neither need nor want, because they will fall in your lap. Crises will happen to you. They happen.

All of a sudden you will be in charge of figuring out how to make the most of something you desperately wanted to avoid. You will be accountable, and you will have to fight like you've never fought before.

Many of you will be knocked down. My father, God rest his soul, said "Success is not measured by whether you are knocked down, everyone is. It is measured by how rapidly you get up." This is how success is determined. This is how dreams are made.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the history of the journey of this nation. Every single time America has been faced with a genuine crisis is when we have made the greatest strides toward our future.

Every single time great things have happened, they have been on the heels of tragedy. It's what separates America. We have taken the unexpected, and made our country stronger, more vibrant, and more prosperous.

I'm about, as all of you are, to write another page in my life. You will start with a very firm foundation. You will have graduated from a great law school that has equipped you with all the fundamentals of the law you need. For me it will not be the law, it is foreign policy, national security, and terrorism.

We both start equipped. But like you, it's not the substance of knowledge that I possess or you possess today that's going to determine if we succeed. Although the substance of knowledge is necessary, it is not sufficient.

It's the knowledge that you will have gained about yourself, the insights you will have gained about others, that are going to determine whether or not you meet and accomplish your aspirations.

I've learned so much more about myself and other people from dealing with the burdens and unexpected obstacles than from any of the benefits or talents God may have blessed me with. I've learned first-hand how generous and thoughtful people can be.

People I never knew in my life rallied around me when I lost my family. I learned about how dedicated and selfless people who I didn't have a particularly high regard for were when I saw first-hand the heroic efforts of first responders and doctors and nurses who saved my life. I learned how genuinely noble people in the medical profession are.

My dad had another expression, he would say, "If it doesn't kill you, it will make you stronger." The press sometimes asks me why after all these years I can be so optimistic in light of all that's going on?

The answer is simple and sincere. I'm optimistic because I know the American people. I'm optimistic because I know, like you do, thousands of ordinary Americans faced with burdens that would make all of us bend who get up every single day and put one foot in front of the other and make it work.

I've learned how genuinely noble so many people are. I am absolutely confident from my experience about

my own judgment. I'm less fearful about the risks that need to be taken. I am much less cynical now, then when I graduated, about the people I serve.

I'm much more certain about the generosity, determination, and capabilities of our fellow Americans. There are people who are less educated than we are, and sometimes we look down on them. But they're smarter, they're tougher and more honorable than anybody gives them credit for.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think you're ready to tackle, as I pray to God you are, every single problem we face and turn it into an opportunity.

There's no reason why we cannot turn this energy crisis into an energy opportunity. There's no reason why we cannot deal with global warming. There's no reason why we cannot deal with terrorism. There's no reason — except for the lack of a leader, who is prepared to challenge them. History has been written this way by every generation before us.

Let me conclude by telling you why else I know your generation is ready to change things. Everybody has an image of 9/11, whether it is airplanes knifing through the Trade Towers, the Pentagon aflame, or the plane going down in western Pennsylvania.

My image is a broadcast showing young people lined up single file, block, upon block, upon block, upon block in New York City — standing, waiting to give blood after they were told no more blood was needed. They stood there. It was a silent scream by an entire generation saying let me help mend this nation's broken heart.

Imagine, if on 9/12, Franklin Roosevelt, or John Kennedy, or even Ronald Reagan had been President of the United States. I expect you would have heard something like, "my fellow Americans we've just had a terrible tragedy. Three thousand of our fellow citizens have been murdered. Our economy is in shambles. But like every generation before us, we will overcome this. And I'm making two announcements today. I'm announcing that I will call a meeting of the world's major powers to meet in Brussels on October the 1st to begin to plan jointly the demise of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. And I'm going to the United States Congress in two weeks and introducing an energy bill that will free us from the iron grip of Middle East oil, and I expect your support"

Who would have said no?

The country is ready. Pain has always resulted in significant gain in this great country of ours.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think the Irish poet Seamus Heaney captured what lives in the heart of the vast majority of Americans. He wrote the "Cure at Troy." There is a stanza in that poem, "History says don't hope on this side of the grave; but, then, once in a lifetime the longed for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme."

It always rises up in face of big challenges. We have a chance, and you have the means to help this country make hope and history rhyme.

But first of all you've got to know yourself. I wish you great luck on that journey of knowing yourself, because

if you find out with certainty who you are, I have absolute certainty you can turn all your talent into making us what we should be.

Thank you very, very much.