

Good Afternoon.

President Widmer – members of Heartland Community College administration and faculty; members of the class of 2015; parents, friends and relatives; ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for the warm welcome. I want for you to know how honored I am to be here today and how truly humbled I feel having been recognized as Heartland's 2015 Distinguished Alumni Award Recipient.

Heartland Community College for me has always been so much more than a bunch of buildings, a school, or even an institution. It truly felt like coming back home today to a place that I grew up, learned so much about myself, and took the first step to embarking upon my life journey. Now that isn't to say I came back to the same place. Much like coming home after college and finding that my mother had made a sewing studio out of my room, I actually asked for a map to make sure I parked in the right parking lot and found the right building! To be sure, the campus has grown just a bit from the 3 buildings present when I went here.

My story really begins fourteen years ago when I graduated a stone's throw down Raab Road from Normal West High School – floating on top of the world. I had met the love of my life – and now wife, decided to major in education, and received the Presidential Scholarship to Heartland Community College. I was that invincible teenager – you know - ready for anything life could throw at me – or so I thought.

That following September, as I was doing some routine tree cutting and burning with my dad, I fell into our burn pit and sustained 3rd degree burns over 30% of my body. I was rushed to Springfield Memorial Burn Center and would undergo multiple surgeries, seemingly endless therapy, and other related aspects of recovery for the next two years. Years later, someone asked me if I wished that it had never happened and I think to their surprise I told them that although I certainly wouldn't want to relive it, I have no regrets as I gained life perspective that I certainly wouldn't have otherwise.

I thought that I would spend a couple of moments today sharing some of that perspective. Now as a history guy, I contemplated doing this through multiple metaphorical events in history – but by my 3rd World War II battle reference and 15 minutes later, my wife nicely suggested that perhaps I should just try to narrow them down to 5 key things that I have learned to be more instructive and applicable to people who live outside of history nerdism.

#1: Strive to be the positive energy in the room.

Hopefully it won't take you a life-threatening accident to realize that every day here on earth has the potential to be awesome - it just takes the right attitude. As the old saying goes, you normally find what you're looking for. If there's anything more toxic than negativity in life – I don't know what it is. Challenge yourself each and every day to seek out the best in people, build the capacity of others, and make the best of situations around you. Practice Positive thinking.

Trust me – it's harder than you think, but it will surprise you the impact that a positive attitude can make on not only your life, but those around you.

#2: Stop making excuses and use what you've earned today to become the person you want to be.

I remember meeting with Dr. Glen Bush one day in his office and discussing the fact that I needed to get out and see the world if I was ever going to teach about it with any kind of success. He looked at me confused, and said “well John there's an airport about 15 minutes from here that will take you anywhere in the world you want to go. What's stopping you?” – Although I didn't have a good answer for him then, I did respond to an article in the paper about 5 years later and ended up going to India for a month on a study exchange. It was life changing – Dr. Bush was right as he usually is. Too many times we find reasons to inhibit our ability to be who are, experience new things, and grow as human beings. So whether it's Drake's mantra YOLO, Horace's carpe diem or Andy Dufresne's advice that you better “get busy living or get busy dying” – from this day on commit to not looking back, not settling for less, and not allowing anything to stand in your way.

#3 Follow your passion.

You've probably heard the saying that if you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life. Well – I'm here to tell you that after 10 years of teaching, it still surprises sometimes that I get paid to do what I do. I realize those are dangerous words for teachers to be saying in these tough budget times in the state of Illinois! But honestly I'm here to tell you that it's true. I wake up every single day excited to go to work and rarely have a bad day. Trust your gut, follow your heart, and pursue your passion.

#4. Take the time to learn how to ice skate.

I know – you weren't really expecting that one, but growing up I had never put on a pair of ice skates and certainly had never envisioned myself as a hockey player. But my 6 year old son Brody began skating a couple of years ago, and time and time again the rink manager asked for parents to volunteer to help coach. Not only did I have reoccurring visions of broken hips and tail bones, missing teeth, and mullet haircuts, but I was too busy at work, too busy going back to school and too busy trying to earn an extra buck doing odd jobs for people after school and on the weekends to learn how to skate much less volunteer to help out at the rink.

Finally I took the plunge, enrolled in a "Learn To Play" class and actually just helped to coach my son's last game of the season this morning. Although my son told my wife that "daddy tries to be a good coach but is really slow at skating," learning to skate and helping to coach my son has probably been one of the most personally rewarding things I've done in my life. Although hockey equipment definitely does not smell like roses – it's important to stop for a minute, rethink your priorities, and make time for the things in life that really matter.

#5. Have perspective.

- When I was transferred to Springfield Memorial for burn treatment, my life was in danger. My family was hysterical, and my world seemed to be crashing down. Although I had cards, balloons, and visitors pouring in each day, all I could do was to feel sorry for myself – in thinking about what laid in store for me. One day I

remember making some statement to a nurse along these lines and her telling me that the elderly guy next door to me had suffered double the amount of burns and would be lucky to ever leave the hospital. While I haven't had many such stark reminders, life often provides opportunities for us to realize that our time on this earth is precious – so go out there and be the best person you can be for the most people around you.

Class of 2015 – Every great journey begins with a single step which you've all taken here today. HCC will always hold a special place in my heart for being the catalyst in my career and in becoming the person I am today. I will forever be grateful and proud to be flying among the Hawks. From the bottom of my heart, I wish you the best of luck in all of your future endeavors and thank you for allowing me the privilege of sharing your special day. Thank you.