

# **The World Beckons**

**by**

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**Community Address**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Graduates – congratulations. You have worked hard to be here today.

Parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and friends of graduates – congratulations. You have prayed hard to be here today.

Faculty and staff – congratulations. You have dedicated your careers to be here today.

Trustees and friends of the university – congratulations. You have given much to be here today.

I am honored to have this opportunity to celebrate with all of you today.

## **THE BEST YEARS**

What can I say that might be of interest and relevance? Let me answer this question by thinking back to when I was sitting where you are sitting now.

The most formative and influential years of my life were those I spent as an undergraduate student. It was there that I found my true identity – learned who I really was. The cocky kid on the outside, who was really scared on the inside, emerged after

four years as a reasonably self-confident graduate who was ready and anxious to enter the next phase of his life. His blind date – a freshman at the time – became his love, passion, best friend, and – yes – wife. This is a once-in-a-lifetime 52-year (and counting) relationship that began when I was sitting where you are now.

Whether you realize it now or not, for many of you here today, your years at Gallaudet will have a similar impact. You have formed a lifetime network of friends including, for some of you, your husbands and wives. You have enhanced your leadership skills. You have established a focus for your career. You have learned lessons that will help you raise a family, become a responsible citizen in a democratic society, and give back to your community.

Truly, this is one of the most significant days of your life.

## **GOING FORWARD**

Many challenges await you: world peace, racial tension, poverty, violence, health care, K-12 education, cost of higher education, indebtedness, ethical and moral behavior, maintaining a democracy, sustaining the environment, technology, economic growth, income inequality, globalization, and the list goes on.

There certainly is enough for you to do. The good news is that we have every confidence that you are up to the task.

Meeting these challenges requires everyone in society to work together. Moreover, research shows that the greater the diversity of the problem-solving team, the better the solution. When deaf and hearing men and women of multiple races, ethnicities, and behavioral and physical attributes come together, more creative ideas emerge.

## **ROLE MODELS**

There are many role models and examples of these collaborations. I shall cite examples from among students, faculty, and administrators.

RIT has more than 15,000 students, 1,200 of whom are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Currently, the President of Student Government is a deaf woman. Two years ago, the valedictorian and commencement speaker for the student body was a deaf woman. The best wrestler in RIT history is deaf. All of RIT's 24 athletic teams have or have had outstanding deaf members. Just last week, I hosted a dinner at my home for the women's basketball team. Two of the members are deaf or hard-of-hearing; the entire team and coaches learned ASL in order to better communicate with each other.

Peter Hauser is a Professor at RIT/NTID. Peter received his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at Gallaudet University. Last week, he and I were together at a dinner party at my home in honor of Senator Paul Sarbanes. I could not have been more impressed as Peter described his research. He studies the effect of sign language on brain organization,

conducting his research jointly with deaf and hearing students and faculty at RIT, Gallaudet, and the University of Rochester.

My final example is the one which brings me my greatest pleasure. It is my very good friend and counselor, and your President, Robert Davila. Bob was born into a poor, Hispanic, migrant worker family in California. He became deaf at a very young age. He had to learn ASL and English at the same time. He was smart and athletic. He still is. He earned his bachelor degree at Gallaudet, his master's degree at Hunter College, and his Ph.D. degree at Syracuse University. He has been president of all the leading national deaf professional associations, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education, Vice President of a major for-profit corporation, Vice President and Director of NTID, and has held many other leadership positions.

Dr. Davila was poor, deaf, Hispanic, and did not know English in his early years. Now he is sophisticated and debonair, and his counsel is highly sought after all over the world. I firmly believed that his remarkable story of a great American had to be told for all the world to learn by. Accordingly, in a few weeks, the RIT Press will be publishing his biography – Moments of Truth: Robert R. Davila, the Story of a Deaf Leader. Be sure to buy a copy.

All of the role models I have discussed are leaders. They have the ability to motivate and inspire the confidence of others. They possess integrity and courage. They are creative. They work hard.

Each of you graduating today possesses these same leadership traits. I call on you to utilize them as you go forward. I know you will.

Let me give you an example of two students who have.

### **A TEST IN LEADERSHIP**

Several weeks ago, the leadership ability of two of RIT's elected student representatives was severely tested. An insult-comedienne was scheduled by Student Government to appear at RIT. Two weeks prior to her appearance, the comedienne made jokes on a radio station which were insulting and offensive to many deaf and hearing students, faculty, and staff.

The President of Student Government, Lizzie Sorkin, and the President of the NTID Student Congress, Sarah Gordon, both of whom are deaf, met with me to advise me as to whether RIT should cancel the comedienne's appearance. The majority of the comments – and some of them extremely strong and even threatening – recommended canceling. On the other side of the question, was the issue of free speech on campus. Moreover, how did RIT's recently approved Honor Code, which specified the importance of treating people with dignity and respect, play into the decision?

It was the consensus of Liz and Sarah, with tears in their eyes and hurt in their hearts, that the show should go on. They believed that in the long run, the principle of free speech needed to be preserved on the college campus, and in the long run NTID would be better served if this position were taken. Peaceful picketing occurred prior to the performance. Liz and Sarah held campus forums prior to the performance. A distinguished panel discussed the issue in a campus-wide forum after the performance.

Literally hundreds of e-mail conversations occurred over this issue. Some deaf students agreed with and supported Liz and Sarah. Many others did not.

In my 50 years of interacting with students at many universities, these two students, Lizzie and Sarah, have made me the most proud. They were thoughtful and sensitive to others. They listened intently to all points of view. They exhibited great courage and took risks. They stood their ground because of what they believed in. Whether I or anyone else agrees or disagrees with their advice and action, we all have to admire and respect their character.

Lizzie and Sarah are true examples of the leadership that our future requires of you graduates today. Whether you would have taken the same action they did is not what matters. What matters is that you think through what you believe is right, and then follow through accordingly. I know you can do it. I know you will do it.

**A BRIGHT FUTURE**

The future is bright for you. *The World Beckons*. Take full advantage of the opportunities that await you.

Recently, you have been through a difficult time with the presidential search process. That is behind you now. Bob Davila is with you now. The future remains bright for Gallaudet, with everyone working together: you as new alumni, other alumni, your President and his team, the faculty and staff, continuing students, your colleagues at RIT/NTID, and all of your friends.

Everyone celebrating here today is proud of you. We have confidence in you, our graduates. We need you. Our country needs you.

I know you will be happy. You will be successful. You will make a difference in the world.

Good luck.