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Remarks at Genesee Community College Commencement

This speech was delivered on May 18, 2008 at Genesee Community College in Batavia, New York.

President Steiner, faculty and staff; proud moms and dads, and family members; distinguished guests; and the graduating class of 2008: good evening...and congratulations.

Thomas Wolfe, the writer, was wrong; you absolutely can go home again, and it feels wonderful to be back.

Tonight, Genesee Community College honors its 40th graduating class. The 762 members of this class join a collection of alumni that is nearly 20,000 people strong. While a number like 20,000 is impressive, don't mistake it as a sign that graduating from college is easy; it's not. Enrolling in college takes courage. Finishing with a degree or certificate takes perseverance. Now that you have done it puts you in a minority that remains much too small in America today: it makes you leaders.

I appreciate what you've accomplished because I know how overwhelming it has been to arrive at this moment. More than thirty years ago – right around this time of the year – I was walking across the stage at my high school, picking up my diploma, wondering how in the world I had even graduated. If I didn't graduate last in my class, I was certainly in sight of it. But you know what? I didn't care. I just wanted out. I didn't know, and really didn't care, what the future held for me. I wanted a job. What I really wanted was money in my pocket.

And so, I got my wish – a job washing dishes in the restaurant in my neighborhood. You know, I had never even considered college. No teacher, no coach, not even a friend of mine had even put the idea of college in my head. Dish-pan-hands, my friend: that was the extent of my aspirations. The good news is after only a few months, I opened my eyes and raised my goals and thought yeah, I can move up. I did, which meant that I was busing tables. I figured if I could get on the floor, I could at least see my customers. At the time I considered that an aggressive and bold career move.

My mom wasn't impressed. And I'm grateful she wasn't. She thought I had more in me than that – even if I couldn't see it. So every day, it seemed, as I clipped on my red bow-tie and put on my thick, cotton, fashion-free, fire engine red busing jacket, Mom would harass me about it. “Glenn, you need to go to college, “she would say while shoving a community college application into my hand. “Fill this thing out, now. You can do this.” We'd go back and forth about it. But you know how mothers are. I eventually caved in.

I was shocked – shocked! – when an acceptance letter came through the mail. In fact, I was convinced it was a mistake. Maybe someone in the registrar's office got my name confused with another. But I decided to go to class. I wasn't taking any chances, however. I kept the acceptance letter in my shirt pocket for proof. I was certain that someone would eventually spot me, realize the college's mistake and ask me to leave.

My next surprise was that I found the classes to be engaging and interesting. Gradually, I developed meaningful relationships – especially with my instructors. It changed me. I felt a growing

confidence. Busing tables wasn't going to be enough. I felt like I was on a launch pad, curious to see just how far I could go.

As I look back on that time, one of the best – if not the best – feature of the community college was the opportunity to interact with inspiring teachers. That is as true today at Genesee as it was then. Instructors like Carl Wahlstrom, instructors like Ruth Andes here at Genesee bring the passion and magic to their teaching day after day, and they've been doing it for more than 30 years. No question, every one of you in a cap and gown feels that way about at least one – it's probably more – but at least one of the instructors here at Genesee. My teachers inspired me to become a teacher – specifically, a community college teacher.

I found myself inspired again, right here at Genesee by yet another person who shares a passion for what community colleges

do. Dr. Stuart Steiner challenged me when I was a dean here. He gave me great responsibilities, paid me well, set the bar high and gave me a great opportunity. Part of me wishes I could say that was a unique circumstance – you know, the leadership of this college looking at a guy like me and saying, “You could be more.” But my Genesee story isn't unique. You see, this medium-sized rural college in upstate New York – Genesee Community



College – has produced more community college presidents and more system chancellors than any other community college in the nation. That's a distinction, my friends, that everyone here should take pride in.

Now I have the pleasure of serving at the helm of the vibrant and dynamic community college system in Virginia – one of the nation's largest. I hope that gives you a sense of why community colleges, and this community college in particular, are so important to me. They are like Ellis Island, an on-ramp if you will, to a great career and a great life...even for a short-sighted busboy.

To the Class of 2008: I want to share with you a true story. And yes, it's brief. In New Market, Virginia – near the border with West Virginia, there's a spot underground called “Endless Caverns.” It's not far from its more famous cousin, Luray Caverns. Endless Caverns were discovered in 1879, by a couple of boys who were chasing a rabbit. They moved some rocks to continue their pursuit and came upon it. The caverns opened for visitors in the 1920s.

The reason I bring up the caverns is a tradition there that I think is fascinating and speaks to the challenges you will face. Endless caverns, so far, live up to their name: the end has yet to be found.

Since just after the Civil War, on three separate occasions parties have been assembled and deployed with the mission of finding the boundaries of the caverns.

The first team couldn't. But they left their mark at the spot where their search ended: a glass bottle. Inside that bottle was a challenge. It declared their effort and called upon some unknown, future explorer or group to begin there on the next quest to find the end. The vast caverns have been explored for not one, not two, not three, not four, not five, but six miles – think of it, six miles! – and yet, the end has yet to be found. Perhaps it doesn't end.

To this day, three separate bottles have been set upon the ground, marking the end of an exploration effort and a challenge for the next.

Ladies and gentlemen, that's what we leave you. Soon enough, it will be your turn to pick up the bottle and carry on.

See, the generation you follow has accomplished a lot – some good, some bad. But it is leaving you with at least as many challenges as it has solved. We'll hand you the vaccine to polio, but we don't have the answers to cancer, diabetes or AIDS. We'll hand you the highest quality of life ever known, but we can't tell you where to find the energy you'll need to sustain it and improve it. We'll hand you incredible weapons and strategies that can be used to win wars, but hardly any answers on how to prevent one.

The book of things we know is simply not as big as the book of things we don't. For instance, we cannot say exactly how many living things inhabit the Earth with us. In fact, at the current pace of our research, it will take a little over 15,000 years to catalog just all of the insects on our planet. The rest of the animal kingdom will take longer. We have yet to explore the depths of our own oceans. In 1958, two members of the U.S. Navy – in a tiny submarine – touched the bottom of the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean floor. It took them four-hours to descend nearly seven miles to the bottom. They spent twenty-minutes there looking out a key-hole sized window. Yet – just like the Apollo missions to the moon – we've never gone back.

We are only beginning to understand the bodies we inhabit. Of the billions upon billions of cells that make up you, there are at least 200,000 different protein cells. We understand, so far, what only about 2% of them do. Those examples fail to scratch just the surface of the many mysteries and challenges that await our attention – that await your attention.

It's your turn. Combine the courage and perseverance you used to get here tonight with what Genesee has given you. Ignore the cynics; ignore the pessimists; ignore the fatalists who all say we can't do better or say that our best days are behind us. They're wrong. You are learners. You are leaders.

Pick up the bottle. Embrace the challenge and show us the way forward.