

President Kwang-Wu Kim's Commencement Speech, Columbia College Chicago, May 2018

Transcribed by Daniel Camponovo

Thank you. Before I begin my remarks, I would also like to give a special thank you to all of the mothers who are here today, Happy Mother's Day. It's no exaggeration to say that without you, none of us would be here.

Graduates, parents, families, friends, guests, distinguished members of the faculty, staff, and all others who are here today, I am delighted to welcome you to this happy occasion and I thank you for being here to bear witness to this very important moment in the lives of our students. Now, with your permission, I would like to address my remarks directly to our graduates.

Graduates, today we honor you and your accomplishments and the choices and the sacrifices which helped you get here today. The degrees you have earned say a great deal about you. They tell the world that you are disciplined, resilient, and tough. My mother always told me that it didn't matter how well you started if you didn't finish well. And that's exactly what each and every one of you has done: finished well. Which makes you winners. Now, there are two things that your degrees actually do not signify. In spite of what Commencement speakers are saying all over the country right now, they do not certify that you are now "in charge." You aren't. Sorry! And they definitely do not certify that the world now owes you. It doesn't. So get over it! It's common wisdom that no one remembers what was said at their graduation. I don't. And frankly, Commencement speeches are fairly predictable.

It's the world that we send our graduates into that can sometimes shake us to the core in ways we could not possibly imagine. When I spoke to graduates in the spring of 2002, we were all grappling with the fear and uncertainty that had come into our lives following the terrorist attacks of the previous September 11. In the spring of 2009, I stood before a class whose families had lived through the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, a period of time in which many families' hopes and dreams were crushed. Today, unlike in 2002 and 2009, the social contract that binds us together seems to be at risk. As a child myself of immigrants, who sacrificed everything so that their children could have access to the American Dream, I encounter, almost daily, behaviors and attitudes that I find repugnant. I have been wondering what to say to you at this moment when we are all struggling to be our better selves.

And then I started thinking about the theme of this year's Manifest: "Own It." At first, those words really didn't mean very much to me, they were in my head and I kept thinking about them, but then suddenly, I heard it: "Own It." You did not create this moment in our history. Our non-functioning political system, the wide-spread injustice and inequity. Our increasingly polarized society, or the shocking disregard for the planet which sustains all of us. But, if you are going to succeed, and I know you will, you are going to have to own it. We rarely get to start where we would like, we always have to start where we are. And I'm placing my bet on you.

You are creative problem solvers. You know how to dream big dreams and then develop the skills needed to turn those dreams into reality. You know how to think, how to train a critical lens on an idea, a position, or an object. And you are savvy about how the world works, and how to get things done. You are certainly not afraid of hard work, and the skepticism of the world doesn't bother you one bit at all. Because you are driven by passion, and curiosity, and you understand that failure is an inevitable part of success. You don't believe everything you hear, and because you are creatives, you value authenticity, which means you know that lying is lying, no matter what it is called. So, own it. Own this moment in time. And change it! Make it better. Make it more human, more humane. Do not tolerate injustice, whether it be racism, or misogyny, or any other hatred of the other. You have eyes with which to see, and voices with which to speak out: use them. Do not be insulted by others' lack of understanding: seize the opportunity to help them see what they could not see or comprehend what they could not understand. Think of all of your best teachers and emulate them. And do not close your hearts to the needs of others. When you see people in trouble, be the leaders that you are. Step forward and help them. Own it, and understand that this is your opportunity, as well as your responsibility. And knowing what you are all capable of achieving, and knowing how much you all care, I have hope.

Now, today, as my sendoff to you, I would like to give you my simple rules for success. These rules have remained the same in all the years that I have been doing this, because it's my belief that in spite of how much the world has changed, some behaviors still matter. There's a list of eight, but don't worry, this won't take very long. Alright, here's the first one that everyone who knows me knows is primary in my thinking.

So, here we go, number one: be on time. Alright, I'm going to say it again, because I really want this one to go in. Be on time! This one is simple: show up late and be passed over. That's how it works. And no, your time is not more valuable than someone else's time. So ignore this rule at your peril. Alright, that's number one. Number two: do what you say you are going to do. Do not overpromise: if you can't do it, just say so. Unreliable people fall off the list. Number three: reach out to others. There is so much to learn from those who are wiser and more experienced than you, and if you are wondering where your successes will come from, I will tell you right now: from others. All successful individuals work hard, are disciplined, are focused, are relentless in pursuing excellence, but behind every successful person are the people who believed and who opened doors. Your opportunities will come because someone truly sees who you are and wants to help you. So the more people who know you, the better.

Number four: listen. I know you're under a lot of pressure these days to promote yourselves, and your ideas, and that's all very very valuable. But be careful not to talk about yourselves too much. As interesting as you all are, you are not the only one. Alright, number five: have compassion for others, and do not be too quick to judge. Until you have walked in another's shoes, you don't have the right. Number six: be grateful. Given all that we have, complaining, whining, and self-pity are inexcusable. Oh, and by the way: get comfortable saying "thank you." A lot. And, if you want the expert-level tip, get used to expressing your thanks in writing. Now, I'm an old guy, but that is not an old-fashioned idea. Number seven: take full responsibility for your words, your choices, your actions, and their consequences. As some of you heard me say, people who make excuses are lame, and people who blame others are losers. So just get it together!

Alright, number eight, this is the last one, and this is the most recent one, because this is a more recent pet peeve: unless you are talking about your very survival, please avoid starting sentences with the two words "I need." This is a linguistic pattern that suggests a kind of entitlement, which is a really bad place to start a conversation. So I'm going to use myself as an illustration of how those words affect me. Alright, so someone comes in my office, and says to me, "I need." Now, anyone who knows me will tell you that I am a really good listener, and on top of that, I can do the Asian no-expression face. Right? But behind that face, here's what's going on in my head: "Oh, really? Oh, you need? Oh, so you came in my office and you're going to tell me what you need? I'll tell you what you need, you need to get stepping!" Not a good idea.

Alright, so that's an awful lot of advice for one speech, so I'm going to stop now. I only have three final exaltations for all of you. Let your light shine. Let your voice be heard. Have faith in the goodness of others and in the bounty of this universe and let your courage surface!

Congratulations.