

April 26, 2015 - It is truly an honor and privilege for me to speak with you today, on the occasion of your graduation from this wonderful school, as well as our larger community of friends and family. I was asked to share a few words with you on this special day in your lives and hopefully there will be something that may resonate with you now or later.

Let me begin by talking about you and this significant milestone in your lives.

This is no small feat which you have achieved in graduating from the Merit School. Each of you is a musician, now most likely a fairly accomplished musician at this stage of your life. That makes you quite special. You should be very proud of this accomplishment which I hope you will always think of as a gift in your life.

Music has to be one of the most treasured aspects of cultures everywhere and it's something that has connected people universally literally since time began. As one of my favorite musicians, Stevie Wonder says, "Music is a world within itself; it is a language we all understand." So music and your immersion in it will always be with you no matter how you chose to have it be a part of your life's choices. Simply said, you are now on a journey that will take many pathways, some may involve music and most likely others will not.

So, congratulations, on this wonderful accomplishment!

Today, as you look to the future, it's worth stopping for a moment and reflecting on the possibilities ahead. And, I have three thoughts to share with you on the future, your future.

First, there's no doubt that having music in your life will lead to a variety of opportunities; however, how you choose to have music be a part of your life will be impacted by a number of experiences and choices you will be making along the way as well as factors that are not within your control.

For example, if you decide to make music a central focus in your professional pursuits, you will need to continue to develop your talent, continue to practice your craft diligently and likely make sacrifices in terms of the time needed to devote to your passion for music. These factors are within your control.

However, your pursuit of music will be impacted by factors outside of your control such as family decisions, financial responsibilities, other interests and, quite frankly, the availability of professional pursuits that involve music. This myriad of factors will change from time to time and most likely will impact decisions you make regarding what role music will play in your life's journey.

But regardless of your decisions, music can always play a role if you want it to. For me, I made the decision to pursue a business career for some of the reasons I cited above. But I always infused music in my life along the way and I've come back to music in a big way in my retirement. And that has brought me new happiness rooted in music! So I wish you the best in keeping music as an important part of your life's journey!

Second, you will find along the way that your music education has given you a set of skills that will be very applicable to other pursuits in your life. I know this because in my business career, I have championed employee training around certain skills and behaviors that are commonly believed to ensure personal success in the workplace. Skills such as focus, discipline, listening, collaboration, confidence in oneself, and the ability to break down complexity and to think creatively. Certainly there have been many studies on the value of music education to developing one's intellectual capacities.

Recently I read a very interesting New York Times article that asked the question, “Is music the key to success?” Successful individuals in different walks of life were asked how their music education impacted their success in life . . . and they all cited various skills, some of which I mentioned previously.

These individuals included:

- Condoleezza Rice who trained to be a concert pianist.
- Alan Greenspan of the Federal Reserve who was a professional saxophone player.
- Paul Allen the founder of Microsoft has a rock band.
- And, Steven Spielberg who plays the clarinet!

Many such high achievers agree that music opens up the pathway to creative thinking. So please know that you take forward some essential skills and qualities that will put you in very good stead no matter where your journey takes you.

This thought, which I found many years ago and has guided me for much of my life, is by Plato:

“Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul.”

My third and final message to you is about the power of music.

I believe, as so many do, in the power of music and its ability to change lives. But I probably do not need to tell you about how the power of music changes lives as I suspect that each of you has experienced this power!

The Merit School of Music mission is to remove economic barriers to potential participation and to stimulate personal and educational growth through music. Today’s graduation is evidence that you have experienced this power.

A number of years ago, during my time at Disney, I had the privilege of meeting Maya Angelou when she spoke to over 1,000 employees at a special event which was celebrating the best of the best of Disney employees. Maya ended her inspiring comments to our cast members by challenging them to continue to engage and inspire those around them. She said the following which in its essence, speaks to the power of music in our lives:

“We are all at once both a composition and a composer. Each of us is a composition in that we reflect all of the people, all of the leaders, all of the people who have touched us during our entire life. But at the same time, each one of us is a composer. Because we have the ability not only to compose the future in our lives, but to help compose the future of everyone around us and the communities in which we live.”

I wish you the very best in your future compositions and may music forever be a part of your life!

Congratulations!