

Commencement Speech at Florida International University

Monday, August 8, 2016

Marie Izquierdo

Chief Academic Officer

It's a great honor to have the opportunity to talk to you today, so first of all I want to say thank you to Florida International University, and to President Mark Rosenberg, for inviting me to this important event. As a two-time alumna of this prestigious university, it fills me with immeasurable pride and absolute joy to be here with you.

Let me also take the opportunity to congratulate you on your remarkable achievement. Graduating from college is no doubt something to be proud of, something to be celebrated. And that's what we are here to do today. It is also a joy to be shared because this is not a journey that you have made alone. In the audience there are people that have accompanied you and have played an important role in helping you achieve this great accomplishment. So, I'd like to congratulate your professors, your friends, and family members that are here today for they have been an essential part of your educational journey, have supported you, and have made this day possible.

Commencement is an opportunity to reflect on what you have accomplished so far through your efforts and determination-- the long nights, the hard work, the setbacks and successes... all of these things have brought you here. Commencement, by definition, also signifies a fresh start, an opportunity to look into the future and be amazed by its endless possibilities.

What you have achieved thus far is not a destination, but the beginning of a wondrous new journey. Seeing the future is the first step towards building it. Today, I urge you to see it, to imagine a better future for the world and go out there and build it.

Some may say that these are difficult, trying times. And while that may seem to be true, it is in times like these that great individuals rise to the occasion and change the world. History has taught us that we human beings are resilient, compassionate, resourceful, imaginative. As educators, as public servants, as professionals regardless of your field of study, you have both the honor and the responsibility to imagine a better future for each and every one of those lives that you will touch throughout your career. Where there is darkness and coldness, let your hearts be light and fire. Where there is fear and hopelessness, let your commitment and compassion lead the way. Where there is bigotry and violence, let your kindness and determination to do the right thing change minds and mend broken spirits. Above all, put your minds and your hearts at the service of others in need, of those who have been depowered by circumstances that you have the preparation, the perseverance, and the power to help them change. Be a change agent for there's no limit to what you can accomplish or help others accomplish.

Oftentimes, we think of heroes as people from the past, people that you read about in history books. Today I'm going to ask you to think of yourselves as

the heroes and the freedom fighters of your generation. Today I'm going to ask you to think of yourselves as those who will tackle the biggest challenges of our times and will remain hopeful despite all obstacles and setbacks.

My first assignment as school principal was at a low performing school in a working class neighborhood in Little Havana. Sixty percent of the students at that school were learning English as a second language and the majority of them were living below the poverty line. Their parents were oftentimes working 2-3 jobs to make ends meet and they were unfamiliar with our school system, non-English speaking and thus challenged to advocate for their children and become involved in their schooling. But their teachers and I believed. We believed in their potential, their resilience, and their perseverance - we believed in THEM. And so, my team of educators and I rolled up our sleeves, engaged their community, supported them academically, and educated their parents. And, before long, Henry Flagler became a three time "A" rated school and met all of the criteria for No Child Left Behind. What occurred at that school was not a miracle. It was not a fluke. It was purposeful actions taken by committed adults that changed the lives of thousands of children. Forever. And despite those moments being in my personal past, each year, I receive letters, emails or simply bump into adults at the grocery store who are living examples of living out their promise.

In my line of work, our mission is college and career readiness. We strive to prepare students for postsecondary education and careers. So as I prepared

for tonight's address, I thought...what is the university's mission? If K-12 is about college and career readiness, then the university's must be readiness for the world of work and life in general. I learned many lessons here at FIU, not just in my classes, but as a college work study student and as a student athlete. You see, I spent a large part of my time here in this very building, although back then it was called the Golden Panther Arena. I know...right now you all are thinking...she's too short to be a basketball player....

You're right! You see, I was a part of the first co-ed cheerleading squad at the university. Long before football, we cheered for men and women's basketball and we competed at the national level ranking as high as 3rd in the nation. I became a collegiate All-American here. But I also became an educator, and a mother. You can say that I pretty much grew up here and along the way I learned many lessons. I'd like to share just a few with you today. First, collectively we are much stronger than our individual selves. Whether it was studying for finals or nailing a difficult routine, we were committed to supporting one another and ensuring success for each other. This made us all better. Second, don't judge a book by its cover. I particularly enjoyed being a contradiction in terms, so to speak, during my college years. Cheerleaders are frequently portrayed as foolhardy, superficial beings. Well, today I am the Chief Academic Officer of the nation's fourth largest school district; its top educator.

Don't be shortsighted in your assessment of people. Peel back the layers, you may be surprised by what you find. And last, an important lesson I learned while at FIU and still keep close to my heart is that skills are not enough. You have to have the will, the belief, and the vision to make things happen.

You have to remain hopeful in the face of adversity. There will be obstacles, but you will see beyond them. You will see your dream and you will build it.

Much has changed since I attended FIU. This campus was called University Park Campus, Primera Casa was an open building housing the original Rathskeller and the pit. But one thing has remained true...you have received a world class education here and are ready to take on the world. To change it.

That's what visionary leaders like Mark Rosenberg have done and continue to do. This university continues to grow and shine. Be like this university. Continue to grow and shine.

Congratulations to all of you. Thank you for inviting me to be here today. I wish all of you the best. Go out there and change the world!