

Commencement Speech for the Class of 2009 from West Chester University

Delivered by Patricia M. Roberts '73,'75

Saturday, May 2, 2009

Thank you, Dr. Weisenstein, members of the Council of Trustees, faculty and staff, and honored guests.

I am pleased and honored to welcome the Class of 2009 to join me, and our many colleagues, as soon to be, West Chester University alum! Congratulations Class of 2009! You are joining a network of successful business, education and community leaders who are making a difference throughout the world.

Congratulations to all of the parents and family members who supported you through this journey!

Welcome!

Class of 2009, you are part of an exciting new chapter in our 21st century workforce where innovation and problem-solving will be at the center of your professional success and personal fulfillment. You are part of a new generation of thinkers who will thrive on entrepreneurial spirit and collaborative change. You must find your passion and follow it. There is a great book by Daniel Pink called [A Whole New Mind, How Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future](#). The future of our society depends on your innovation, your empathy, and your “big picture” ideas.

You are the 21st century workforce. It will be challenging, yet exciting. Remember these three key ingredients... 1) be entrepreneurial in your thinking, 2) collaborate and partner, and 3) find your passion. West Chester University has prepared you to take on this challenge.

Let me paint you a picture. Imagine... the country is in the midst of a deep recession. The stock market has lost 50% of its value and unemployment is at an all time high. Sound familiar? Yes it does, but the year I am describing was 1973, the year I sat in your seat feeling all of the same emotions that you have today... hope, optimism and a yes, healthy sprinkling of downright panic. Jobs were scarce but as Randy Pausch, author of the book, [The Last Lecture](#), wrote... “Obstacles are put in your way to remind you how badly you want something.”

I, along with many other graduates of West Chester University that year, wanted to teach badly. We had visions of teaching in one of the local public school districts and dreamed of the security that a job in public education offered. We would retire as classroom teachers together... or so we thought.

I never did get that public school teaching job that Fall of 1973. I did, however, take a path that changed my life forever. I was hired as a teacher on the campus of West Chester University in the Demonstration School

located where Bull Center now stands. Imagine if you will, a bustling elementary school right here on campus. That first teaching position had no job security and paid half the salary of a public school teaching job. I earned less than \$7000 a year. I know what you're thinking and you are right. Believe me, it did not go very far back then either, especially when my first car, a Plymouth Duster, cost \$3000. Remember that parents? But I took that job and embraced everything it had to offer; learning about teaching, grant writing, managing budgets, and research. The talented and passionate people there became mentors and life-long friends.

West Chester University taught me that first lesson for success...entrepreneurial thinking. How was I going to use my degree in education to explore other opportunities? From the beginning, the message was clear...embrace change and take responsibility for creating your own future.

When the Demonstration School on campus closed its doors in the late 1970's, I had the chance to use my entrepreneurial spirit to create my next job. I started my first business with a colleague from West Chester University, Mary Alice Felleisen. We wrote grants for funding to continue the exciting work that began at the Demonstration School. My new career in teacher training took me from California to New York. You have to understand, I had never ventured far from my hometown of Roxborough in Philadelphia.

Well, by the mid 1980's, the grant monies for teacher training had all but disappeared. It was the beginning of the personal computer age. I saw a need for computer training and connected with a business partner who complemented my skills. Together we launched a successful multi-million dollar computer training and software business. All of this with my degree in education from West Chester University.

If you're listening carefully, the second lesson is clear...collaborative partnership. I have good news for you. Contrary to what your professors have told you over the years, you do not need to know everything. I will let you in on a secret that only my second business partner knows...I am terrible at technology! But we grew a successful technology company because he loved technology and I loved education. What a perfect marriage. Team up with a partner who will complement your talents.

I sold my business in 1999 at the peak of the technology boom. Imagine where your degree will lead you in 10 or 20 years! The opportunities are endless.

Now I was ready to give back. I returned to West Chester University in 2000. There was a spirit of innovation and commitment to the community everywhere on campus. I connected with visionary thinkers, my mentor Dr. Judy Finkel, and past president Dr. Madeleine Wing Adler, and Provost Dr. Linda Lamwers

to develop the Institute for Educational Excellence and Entrepreneurship, the 3E Institute, working with entrepreneurial educators across the region.

And so it goes. Today, I am the principal of the Academy In Manayunk, an amazing school that is changing the lives of children with learning disabilities every day. Fueled by my commitment to help my own daughter, I launched the Academy In Manayunk with my partner Nancy Blair and a team of dedicated professionals. In three short years, the Academy has grown to over 100 students in grades 1 through 10 with a goal of graduating our first class in 2012! What an amazing journey for someone who could not get a public school teaching job in 1973! This is the third and most important lesson...find, then follow your passion.

The year is 2009. The challenges are great, the obstacles many. But obstacles are really opportunities to realize your gifts. Is your gift working with people, or technology or big ideas? Think outside the box. Is there a need that you see that is not being met? Is there a product or service you cannot find? Is there a child who inspires you to dedicate your life to starting a school? Develop that new idea and create a new career path for yourself. Look for collaborative partnerships. Take a moment - turn to your left; now turn to your right. The person next to you could be your future business partner. Be sure to introduce yourselves. And finally, find your passion. "Remember, if you do what you like, you never really work a day in your life."

I have been honored to watch the University grow and flourish over the past 10 years since I returned to campus. West Chester University celebrates entrepreneurship, partnership, and passion for doing good work. I look forward to working with Dr. Weisenstein, you, the Class of 2009, and the entire community of alumni from the University as we build on the opportunities that we have begun here on campus. Stay in touch, stay connected, and hold your families close. A special thank you to my family and friends for being part of my exciting journey.

To all of the families and members of the Class of 2009, congratulations and take advantage of all that this West Chester University network of entrepreneurial thinkers has to offer! Thank you and good luck!