

CCV commencement address. June, 1st 2019 AD.

Thank you for having me here today. It is indeed an honor. So, welcome all and congratulations to the CCV graduating class of 2019. You've come a long way. You've earned it. And the journey begins anew.

I started Darn Tough Vermont in 2004 in an attempt to save Cabot Hosiery Mills from closing its doors. Our customers were taking their business offshore to outsource for cheaper labor and this had drastic effects on all aspects of our business. We went from 5 days a week down to 3. We cut the staff from around 70 folks to 35 and got rid of all benefits, 401K health insurance, what have you. We were insolvent on the edge of bankruptcy. It was tough. It was darn tough.

Fast forward to today. We run 6 days a week on 3 shifts and we have close to 300 hardworking Vermonters coming to work every day. We now occupy 3 buildings in Northfield, with top line/revenue growth rates at 25-30% a year.

Darn Tough socks are knit exclusively in Northfield, Vermont, The Sock Capital of the World. The plan was always to leverage who we were, how we did it, and where we did it, as the foundation of our story. Closing shop in Northfield, outsourcing, was never an option for me. Something I realized early on; nobody ever outsourced anything for quality....

Now I'm going to tell you how I got here—

I'll begin at the end of my story and tell you that the sweetest, coldest water sits at the bottom of the well.

Other than being a father and a reasonably good husband, the best thing that ever happened to me was almost going out of business. A dire experience I assure you. One that quickly focus the mind, body and spirit.

I realized pretty quickly that in order to save what was left of my sock business it was going to take something drastic, and that something drastic ended up being me.

In order to set the stage for this transition I took a closer look at the sock market, it's huge by the way, 99.9% of the population has 2 feet, and in an instant, it hit

me—the world doesn't need another anything. I'll say it again—the world doesn't need another anything.

It's a gift to be able to look at something and see what's missing or what's wrong. What's wrong is the future. I'll say it again. What's wrong is the future. We are here today simply from turning wrongs into rights.

In doing so, turning wrongs to rights, if you can't be original, start over. I mean it. The last thing you want to hear is, "I've seen that before." If you can't be first you have to be the best. It's crowded in the middle. The top is always empty.

Armed with—the world doesn't need another anything and a mindset of, what's wrong with this picture, you have to have a vision.

Vision needn't be anything elaborate. The simpler the better. At the outset a vision is knowing what you want to achieve or what the outcome looks like **before** you start. Don't start anything until you see the ending first.

And the hardest thing, the absolute hardest thing about achieving anything, is starting. Once you start you have the key ingredient to keep moving forward—momentum.

All right, the world doesn't need another anything, you know what's wrong, you have a vision and you've started. Now what?

You cannot be deterred.

And guess what, you will be. Not by the easy stuff, but by the hard stuff. The stuff you've never done. The stuff you think you can't do. The stuff you're afraid of. The stuff you've always been afraid of. Heck, you will be deterred by stuff you didn't even know existed. That stuff is the stuff most people will never do and that makes all the difference.

Life will throw infinite stuff at you. Overcoming that stuff, your stuff, and not being deterred from your vision, why you started in the first place, is the only way to achieve anything.

Remember, I said the hardest part is starting. Easier than starting, but difficult nonetheless, is the hard stuff you will have to do to achieve anything.

So, how to deal with the hard stuff? The stuff you think you can't do, the stuff you're afraid of?

Ok, here's what you do with the hard stuff. **YOU DO IT!**

It's not rocket science. You must force yourself into the stuff, into the unknown, the abyss, the fear, and only when you've given all you can, have experienced the pain of growth, have hit rock bottom, have gone through versus over or around, will you be able to achieve anything truly worth achieving.

Nothing terribly new here, right? No pain no gain, Nike's line, just do it.

But then what? What happens after the pain and, "you just did it....?" What happens next? More rocket science.

YOU KEEP GOING! One victory will lead to another and another. You will have grown, changed a bit because of the difficult and hitting bottom.

You'll get up, **not** dust yourself off, you earned that dust, and you'll learn to chase the pain, chase the bottom, chase the difficult. Success, achieving anything, is not a one and done exercise. Success in anything requires repetition of the stuff you think you can't do, won't do, are afraid to do, thought you did last week, think you'll do next week, and on and on it goes.

Ok, I'm going to start bringing you home.

In continuing to chase the difficult, the fear, the pain, the bottom, I've observed the following:

In the end it really is about "you." The airlines ask you to put your face mask on before helping others. If you can't take care of yourself you are worthless to anyone else.

That being said, don't make it about you. And don't let *anyone else* make it about you either.

Yesterday is gone. Move on. Spend most if not all your time in the present. And don't take away anyone's ability to be in the present.

Don't fight two fights. If you don't like what you're doing but know it's the right thing to do, figure out ways to like it and that will make all the difference.

If you're going to go after it, do it hat in hand. Be humble and you'll have a much greater chance of success.

Most people don't know this, but we hold the hand that holds us down.

It's not *what* you do; it's what you don't do.

And it's not what you do and don't do; it's how you do it.

There are an infinite number of reasons to lie yet there is no good reason to.

Only procrastinate for so long. Eventually everything happens. Until then it's 50/50.

Be wary of anything that's free. Don't wait hours in line for *anything*.

It's not the media. It's us. All of us.

You need to be lucky, but don't count on it.

If you're not a robe-wearing, bench-sitting, gavel-pounding judge, stop judging.

Try not to define things. Definitions build walls and limit growth. What you do / have done isn't who you are.

Difficult is good. Run the other way from complicated.

You'll need to live by these contradictory terms—

Impatience/ultimate patience

Caring completely/not caring at all

Being completely prepared/not prepared at all

Life/death

Yes/no

Now I'll end where I started.

If you're going to do anything with your life be original. The world doesn't need another anything. What's wrong is the future. Vision—see the end before you start. Then start. Don't be deterred and DO IT. Then keep on doing it.

You have to go deep. You must force yourself into the stuff, into the unknown, the abyss, the fear, and only when you've given all you can, have experienced the pain of growth, have hit rock bottom, gone *through* versus over or around, will you be able to achieve anything truly worth having.

Go deep. Hit bottom.

And when you're thirsty for more—remember—the coldest, sweetest water sits at the bottom of the well.

I'd like to thank Joyce Judy, president of CCV, as well as the CCV faculty and staff for the opportunity to speak here today. Once again congratulations to the CCV graduating class of 2019!

Thank you, God bless you, and good luck!