

"Class of 2026 welcome - to your moment. Before we begin please take a minute and look around the room. These are not strangers, these are your people. You are surrounded by people who love you, people who are proud of you, people who have watched you face the challenges that have come your way with strength and grace - they have seen you refuse to give up, no matter how hard things got, and they are here right now because they wouldn't miss your moment of glory for anything in the world.

Now I want you to close your eyes. I want you to remember when you almost gave up. I want you to relive the moment when you could have tapped out - you could have said, enough! It's just too, damn, hard. I just don't have it in me to find a little more to give. I already gave it everything I had, but it just wasn't enough. Imagine how you would feel right now, if you had believed yourself back then. Just imagine if you'd walked away from the bright future that's in front of you right now. You know, the one you get to finally stop dreaming of, and start grabbing with both hands.

The simple truth is, you were wrong. It wasn't too hard, when life came out at you with its worst, you were your best. You found a little more to give, you found another gear to shift into. You found the courage, the strength, the perseverance - the will - to dare to believe that your dreams were possible, that they were worth the struggle. You made it happen.

I remember the first time I almost gave up. I was on a jobsite in Calais Vermont, building a timber frame, putting up green, Hemlock 4" x 6" rafters. They were 16 feet long. They say the human brain doesn't fully develop until you're 26. At the time, I was 24 :) We got into one of those worksite competitions you can find near any construction porta potty in North America. You know the one - who's the toughest? Who's the strongest? Who can take whatever we happen to be doing at the moment just a little farther than anyone else. The game of the day was the 4" x 6" x 16' Green Hemlock beam olympics. It had just one rule: who can lift the most.

Well, back in my day, I used to be able to throw a pigskin over those mountains :) Sure enough I lifted the most beams. I "won" and I felt mighty smug about it for the rest of the day. Trouble was, the next morning I couldn't stand up, or walk, or get out of bed. I couldn't do any of those things for a full week, it turns out.

I learned later that I'd ruptured a disc in my spine. For the first time in as far back as I could remember, I had nothing but time. All I could do was lay there all day and think. I had dropped out of high school 7 years before that and done all of the things you can do without

a high school diploma. I was a restaurant dishwasher and prepcook and server. I was a forest fire fighter and a house painter. I was a highway flagger. I was a gas station attendant and a logger. I was a roofer and a mason tender, and eventually, a carpenter. But as far as I could tell, you have to be able to stand up and walk, to do all of those things.

I just wanted to quit. Just stay in that bed forever, throw myself at the mercy of the world and just stop scrapping myself off the floor and trying to keep being strong and resilient.

And I remember the moment right after that, when I talked myself out of that, and started to believe - probably for the first time ever that I had all I needed inside of me, to make it through.

I realized I had to face a simple truth, I needed to make a big change. As hard as school had been for me in the past, I knew I had to dare to try again - I had to go to college. I was a lucky one, after that week of dark nights of the soul, once again I could stand up, and walk again.

I went to Schulmeyer Hall at the CCV campus in Montpelier and registered for classes. I was lucky that my mom and grandma had saved me enough money to pay for the first semester at CCV. and it was a good thing, because I couldn't afford to stop what I was doing and just go to school. I had to keep working. I had to go right back to those beams.

Like a lot of you, I was an adult student. By the time I got into those classroom chairs at night, I was smoked. I'd spend the days mixing concrete and caulking and painting things - walking heavy bundles of shingles up ladders, ripping miles of trim through table saws and while trying my best to hold on to all my fingers, doing whatever it took to pay the bills.

I'd sit in the back of the room in paint stained overalls and try my hardest not to fall asleep, and I'd look around the room and see a sea of fresh faced young people who didn't seem to know what a sawzall was. But when you boil it all down, we were there for the same reason - trying to make our life better.

I took the slow path to get the credits I needed, because I had to work full time the whole time I was in school. Eventually I had enough credits to transfer into Johnson State College through the External Degree Program. I was on my way, but it was sure slow going. There weren't any two ways about it, getting my bachelors degree while working as a builder full time was going to be a tough row to hoe. The years went on, and my overalls got more paint and spray foam on them with each passing day. Truth be told, I did fall asleep in the back of those Schulmeyer Hall class rooms at night more than once. But I pushed through, I kept

putting one foot in front of the other, and made it happen, no matter what life threw at me.

Like you all did. Like. Every. Single. One. Of. You. In. Front. Of. Me. Today. Guys, you made it happen! You didn't let the hard times keep you down, you kept it a hundred, and kept putting one foot in front of the other and now you're standing here today with your degrees in your hand. But a diploma's not what you're holding today. What you're holding is a set of keys - they key to your future, that is now wide, wide open.

That same spirit you found in the struggle to get here - that same deep well of endurance and resilience and faith in your own ability to overcome - that's yours now. It's not going anywhere. You can always reach for it and push a little harder, dig a little deeper, find a little more to give to overcome whatever might be blocking your path forward to your dreams, the next time you find yourself in the gauntlet.

Class of 2026, welcome to your bright, wide open future. Class of 2026 - you have arrived."