

I'll begin by expressing my deepest appreciation to President Pestello, the Board of Trustees, faculty, staff and students of St. Louis University for the honor of being with you today. I have attended scores of graduation ceremonies, both on my own campus, The University of Texas at El Paso—better known as UTEP—and in other settings, and I've deeply appreciated numerous recognitions along the way. But, I cannot imagine a more meaningful honor than this one from St. Louis University, my alma mater, the place where my nearly 60-year higher education journey began.

I extend my warmest congratulations to all of you who are graduating today. You are smart, overflowing with potential, and well prepared to make an impact, wherever your lives may take you! Your talent and hard work have paid off as you celebrate reaching this well-earned major milestone in your lives. You've also surely learned that no one ever does anything alone. So, I know you join me in thanking the St. Louis U. faculty and staff, and your family members, fellow students and friends who have supported your efforts through their love, their financial investments, and their confidence in you and your future.

When I was first contacted by President Pestello with an invitation to join you for commencement today, I was both surprised and deeply humbled. My thoughts immediately rushed back to the time when I enrolled as a student here, thanks to St. Louis University's willingness to take the risk of admitting this academically underprepared and unpolished graduate of a local public high

school where students weren't usually college-bound. Frankly, standing here before you today seems quite improbable too....yet another bet that St. Louis U. made on me.....and I trust that the outcome will be equally positive!

Since accepting this invitation, I've thought quite a lot about the role that this university has played in shaping my life trajectory. I am deeply grateful knowing that completing my SLU degree in 1961 opened the door to a whole new series of opportunities, each of which, in turn, continued to broaden my educational, career and life options....including such amazing experiences as visiting the South Pole research station as a member of the National Science Board, and attending the coronation of the King of Bhutan.

I know too that had St. Louis University not been willing to make a bet on me and my educational dreams, there's very little likelihood that I'd be celebrating with all of you today and enjoying the privilege of telling you my story.

I attended Cleveland High School in South St. Louis—does anyone remember Cleveland?—where expectations of all of us enrolled there were excessively modest. We weren't viewed as likely college goers, and little was done to encourage us to consider that option.

We were blue-collar kids, nearly all of whom would go to work upon completing high school—the boys would become apprentice electricians, plumbers, and carpenters in the unions at Anheuser-Busch, Monsanto, and McDonnell Aircraft, and the girls would marry them, perhaps after a brief stint working as a

secretary, for which we had been well prepared through high school courses in typing and shorthand..... together with a small dose of home economics.

Upon graduating from Cleveland High, I went to work as a receptionist and switchboard operator for a large industrial firm...I was the Lily Tomlin of Nordberg Manufacturing. Do any of the graduates know what a switchboard is? Does anyone know who Lily Tomlin is?

After working for a month or so, and mastering all of the switchboard functions—connecting, disconnecting, transferring, conferencing—I concluded that my job offered little promise as a lifetime career. I wish I could claim some prescience about the impending transformation in telecommunications technology, but the truth was that I was 17 years old and utterly bored. So, after considering other options, continuing my education seemed to offer the greatest potential. But, how to do that?

It's hard to believe that at that time—in 1957—there were no public universities in St. Louis, so I basically had two local choices: St. Louis U. or Washington U. Although tuition at St. Louis U. was, as I recall—and you may want to hold onto your seats here!--\$300 per semester, which was slightly less expensive than Washington U.'s \$375 per semester, it was public transportation that tipped the scale for me....I could more easily get to St. Louis U. on the bus and streetcar.

I secured a half-time job as a typist and errand-runner for a small construction company on Laclede Street, only a couple of blocks from the campus, and

together with a tutoring job on Saturday mornings, my earnings were adequate to support my tuition, books and transportation costs.

During all four years of my enrollment, I attended classes in the mornings, worked in the afternoons and studied relentlessly every evening and on weekends. I didn't join student organizations, and didn't participate in campus activities--a decision I now recognize as a huge missed opportunity. Instead, I devoted all my time to trying to compensate for what I quickly realized was my very weak high school preparation, as I tried to compete with graduates of St. Louis University High School. I'll never forget that they all claimed to have read Dante, and I'd never even heard of him!

Choosing to attend SLU turned out to be one of the most important and best life decisions I've ever made. I majored in Spanish and had the privilege of learning from such eminent Jesuit scholars and teachers as John Francis Bannon, Rosario Mazza, and Ray Sullivant, who unleashed my love of learning and inspired me to aim high.

I will be forever grateful to Father Robert Henle, who was Graduate Dean, for encouraging me to pursue graduate study. With his support, I had several exciting opportunities upon completing my bachelor's degree, and aiming as high as I could, I accepted a Fulbright Fellowship to study at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil....which was quite a stretch for a Cleveland High School graduate who'd never been on an airplane!

I know now how extremely fortunate I was that the university to which I had access at a critical crossroads in my life happened to offer both a rigorous education and a caring environment, where I was able to grow in both competence and confidence, building a foundation for an extraordinarily rewarding career and life. I'm confident that all of you whose graduation we're celebrating today recognize how well your SLU education has both challenged and empowered you too.

Perhaps even more importantly, my understanding of what SLU represented for me has fueled my passion as a model and advocate for the importance of higher education access and opportunities for all talented and motivated young people, whatever their backgrounds or financial means, to enable them to achieve their full potential and attain their highest aspirations.

The second most important life decision I made was to join the faculty at The University of Texas at El Paso upon completing my doctorate at The University of Texas at Austin. I didn't know much about UTEP or El Paso before heading there to start my academic career, but once I found that beautiful binational community in the Chihuahuan Desert, where the power of higher education is especially palpable, I knew I had found my calling.....and I'm especially privileged and proud to have served as UTEP's president for the past nearly 30 years.

UTEP is a public research university enrolling 24,000 students, the majority of whom are first in their families to attend college, just like me. Most are from the surrounding El Paso-Juárez border, a metropolitan area of 2.5 million

people, and they reflect the region's demographics: 84% are Mexican American and another 6% are Mexican nationals, most of whom commute daily across the international boundary from Ciudad Juárez. The most telling statistic, however, is socioeconomic: one-third of our students report a family income of \$20,000 a year or less; these are students who are least likely to earn a university degree, because even with their abundant talent, higher education is financially out of reach for them.

In fact, in the United States today, only about 10% of young people in the lowest socioeconomic quartile earn a bachelor's degree compared with 75% of their peers in the highest quartile, a disparity that is truly shocking....unless of course you believe that that talent and wealth are highly correlated.

But overcoming odds and punching above our weight is exactly what drives all of us—students, faculty, and staff—at UTEP. We are determined to demonstrate that a public university located in a low-resourced setting can successfully achieve a promise to offer access and affordability to talented and motivated students, whatever their backgrounds, while providing them with a rigorous education that will ensure their competitiveness upon graduation.

We believe we are playing a key role as a model for social justice, reducing the growing divide between haves and have-nots and the resulting social and political polarization that we are witnessing in the U.S. today. When doubters question whether a university can be equally committed to both access and excellence, I know from my personal experience at St. Louis University that this is a mission that absolutely can—and must—be accomplished.

So, what does this story have to do with all of you? Like me, you are also the beneficiaries of the quality education offered to you at St. Louis University, and you have met the highest academic standards and gained valuable experiences that will guide your life trajectories.

I hope that you'll pause for a moment once the excitement of your graduation celebration has ebbed just a bit, to imagine the story that you'd like to be able to tell a group of graduates when you return to St. Louis U., 50 years from now as a Golden Graduate. What made your education here so special and how did your St. Louis University education shape your life directions?

Although today may appear to be the end of a journey, commencements are in fact beginnings, and you are now at the start of an exciting new phase in your lives, with a potential for fulfillment of dreams that wouldn't have been attainable without completing the degrees you celebrate today. Just as SLU formed my deepest passions and life choices, your SLU experience will shape yours. Trust the power of both the excellence of the education you've experienced here and, especially, those persistent passions that energize you.

And remember, too, that with the many benefits of degree completion come increased responsibilities. Use your fine SLU education to do well, but also remember that you're very well prepared to do good too. Understand that the opportunity you had to study, learn and grow at SLU was precious. Don't for a moment take it for granted, do all you can to share its benefits with others.

Although my Cleveland High School in South St. Louis has closed, there are surely still many equivalents to it in this community and across this country, schools where low expectations are set and met by low-resourced students whose talents are squandered and whose life options shrink in school, rather than grow.

So, whatever your profession or life direction, be ever mindful of your capacity to help others access opportunities to become educated too....not only family members and friends, but other talented young people whose lives you now have the power to transform—through tutoring, mentoring, jobs, scholarships, internships, volunteer service in schools or on school boards, and a variety of other support strategies. Investing your time, talent and financial resources in increasing others’ educational opportunities will not only impact their and their families’ lives, but significantly impact our collective prosperity and quality of life.

Congratulations, again, to the graduates’ on the successes that we celebrate today. All of us are very proud of you, and know that we will be even prouder still as you go on to lead highly successful and meaningful lives. SLU has been a powerful force in preparing you well, and now we’re counting on you to leverage this educational experience to become powerful forces yourselves in transforming the lives of others.

Thank you again for sharing your graduation with me. My best wishes to all of you!