

## WRHS 2011 Commencement Address

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Welcome members of the Winnisquam Regional High School community – students, parents, family, teachers, colleagues, administrators, school board members, honored guests, and the CLASS of 2011 to your commencement exercises.

Thank you to the Class of 2011 for bestowing on me the honor of speaking with you today. There are many accolades important to a teacher, but none more so than one given freely from the students. It is an honor of the highest order, and I am flattered to be here.

A simple internet search for “commencement speech” yields around 4.5 million hits. Digging a little further will uncover a dizzying number of categories for these speeches – by men, by women, funny, calendar year, celebrities, politicians, journalists, athletes, a top-ten, Steve Jobs (He spoke at Stanford University in 2005 and it’s a very popular speech), and many more.

There is such an overload of possibilities for research that I had to pare down the topic. I started searching for only “memorable” speeches. Names like J. K. Rowling, Jim Lehrer, Will Ferrell, John F. Kennedy, “Dr. Suess” and others came to the surface. With such intelligent well-known people – employing even greater speech writers – being bandied about on the internet, this speech became rather daunting.

Still looking for inspiration and finding only abject disappointment I began to think about the commencement speeches from my past. Much like most of you here I’ve been to quite a few. Yet when I tried to recall some content – even a tiny, tiny bit – I could not; not a theme, not an idea, not a challenge, not a joke. Aside from the usual platitudes and over-used clichés, not a single word was memorable enough to have stayed with me all these many years.

In its place, however, is the knowledge that I wasn’t all that prepared to face real life. I went from high school graduation directly to Ft. Benning, GA and the United States Army Infantry School. From there I returned to college. It wasn’t special or unique as many of my friends also headed off to start a career in the armed services.

I have, however, made quite a few mistakes. These mistakes have come in all shapes and sizes, but they were extremely valuable to me as I continue to grow up. However, some of those mistakes might have been avoided had I just been told about them. Now I’m not saying, in any way, that my 18-year-old self would’ve followed anyone’s advice (how many 18-yo’s do?), but I am saying I wished I’d heard it.

Here is it – fourteen little nuggets of information that, in all honesty, when I was 18 I’d have probably ignored anyway.

### **1) Secretaries and Maintenance staff run the entire world.**

In our jobs and lives we all have supervisors, managers, principals, superintendents, vice presidents, shift leaders, team leaders, assistant managers and more, but all of them would cease to function without their secretaries and office staff and maintenance crews. Respect your bosses and work diligently, but take care of those people who support you. Here at WRHS I’d be lost without Barb Foster and Mike Miller because they keep the place running. Never forget that.

### **2) Understand basic banking and finance, and control impulse spending**

If there’s anything that got me in trouble financially, it’s impulse spending. That was very hard for me to control. I’d buy a pair of sneakers just because I had money in my pocket. I love to buy music

anytime I could, and believe me I've bought a lot of music. It would have been great knowledge 25 years ago to have been able to analyze the purchase; do I need it? Do I want it? Do I have the money?

Be able to understand your bank statement and balance your accounts. Understand what compound interest is – if you don't understand it, you'll be doomed to pay it.

**3) If your car breaks down while travelling in an unfamiliar place, take it to a big car dealership to be repaired.**

Ok – this isn't talking trash about local mechanics and independent garages; it's more about protecting yourself. I love my local mechanic, and no one else touches my car – but I know him well and have built a relationship over years of repairs, consultations, and trust.

In a strange city, though, car dealerships are the way to go. You might pay more for the services at a dealership, but the work will be guaranteed.

**4) Don't ever borrow or lend money between friends.**

It's that simple. True friendships are much deeper than money, and they get trivialized and destroyed over money. Don't do it.

**5) Don't get that pre-approved credit card that will come in the mail.**

Remember how I talked about basic finance? This one killed me. I was in debt for years and years because of this one, simple mistake.

I was a sophomore in college and in the mail, one day, came a letter from American Express. Opening it I learned they were going to give me a credit card, in my name, without a co-signer (again, see basic finance to understand what a co-signer is). I was shocked, but I sent it in as soon as possible. A couple of weeks later it arrived. I HAD MY OWN CREDIT CARD!! So, as any stupid college student, I used this card and my perfect credit score (again, see basic finance) to get a few other cards.

Within a few months I was buried in debt and I ruined my financial future for the next decade. That credit card is NOT worth it.

**6) Get everything in writing.**

That guy you're going to sell your car to -- on a gentleman's agreement? He's not gonna pay you. The promises your supervisor makes to you concerning extra vacation time?? You're not going to get it. Whatever you do, wherever you can, get it in writing to protect yourself.

**7) Keep \$50 to \$100 hidden somewhere in your car.**

This money isn't for a fast-food purchase. This isn't for purchasing your favorite beverage. This money isn't for taking someone to the movies. This money isn't for the small stuff. This money is for that moment that neither you nor I can predict. Trust me – something will happen and you're gonna need it.

**8) Start funding your retirement now, and don't withdraw it.**

It sickens me to realize what I might have as a retirement nest-egg today if I'd have been smart enough to put away \$1,000.00 in 1988. I knew about retirement when I was 18, but I never took it seriously; I told myself I was going to think about that in my 40's. Well, now that I'm in my (beat) 30's I wish I could go back in time and thump that 18-yo Kirk in the head.

**9) Don't buy that used car or truck without checking it out very closely.**

...because as sure as I'm standing here it will never work right. You think buying it for \$750 is a bargain cause it's got a great paint job, but it's gonna take \$2500 to get it road-worthy.

**10) Learn to cook basic meals.**

My mother is, and has always been, an excellent cook. As I grew up, though, she taught me to be able to cook for myself – not gourmet meals or anything, but the basic stuff that will keep you from eating Twinkies as a main course. It has, many times, saved me from going hungry and also impressed a girlfriend or two. (clear your throat)

**11) Never fry bacon in the nude.**

I will not elaborate on this story. Suffice to say it is an EXCELLENT lesson to learn as quickly as possible.

**12) Find a hobby you love and practice it with a passion.**

I don't care what it is – fishing, crochet, baseball, coin collection, belly-dancing, crossword puzzles, reading, swimming, tattoos – get a hobby (a legal one would be my recommendation) and practice it. MAKE TIME to have fun and pursue your passions.

Some of my hobbies included comic book collection (Marvel, not DC), kickboxing, waterskiing, and singing. Many a time did these hobbies get me to relax and recharge for the routine of daily life, so I recommend this highly to you.

**13) After high school is over it is hard work to keep in touch with your best friends. Your true friends deserve that work.**

Once today is over your friendships will be forever changed. Everyone says “Keep in Touch,” but very few actually work to make that happen. “Friending” someone on FACEBOOK does not constitute keeping in touch. You need to remain in contact through the years, forcing yourself to contact them.

Stay involved with their lives, their families and their careers. Most of the friendships you have now, in high school, will fade very quickly. I graduated with 150 in my high school class, and I haven't even thought of most of them in 25 years.

In a few years you will have forgotten more of your classmates than you will remember. I was home a few weeks ago and went to see my brother. We went to a (beat) local establishment for some refreshments and as we sat down he pointed to a guy sitting a few tables over. He said that this guy and I went to school together, but I didn't remember him and didn't remember his name. He knew my brother, so he came over to say hello. I shook his hand and we introduced ourselves. My brother said we went to school together, but neither one of us remembered the other. It wasn't sad or anything, but it does prove that you have to work to keep in touch.

Look around, because the few classmates you truly love and cherish are worth the effort it takes to actually “keep in touch.”

**14) No matter what advice or suggestions you get, you'll make all your own mistakes anyway.**

Now I'm not under any illusion that even a few of you will remember this speech, but I'm hoping that one or two of these thoughts might stay with you for a while. The problem is whether or not you actually learn from your mistakes. My dad always used to say – “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”

Every experience I've ever had brought me to this day. Whatever I did or thought or tried created the person I am today. All of the pain, the tears, the trials, the successes, the mistakes, the hangovers, the debt and that fat; it was all worth it.

Good luck, Class of 2011. Thank you for this singular honor of speaking to you.

Peace.