

*Congressman Joe Kennedy III Prepared Remarks  
Mt. Ida College 2014 Commencement Address  
May 16, 2014*

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Thank you Mr. President for that kind introduction, for extending me the great honor of participating in today's events, and for the level of commitment you have brought to both Mt. Ida and the entire Newton community.

To my fellow honorary degree recipients, Sarah-Ann, Stephen, I think you'll agree with me that there is pretty much nothing better than being handed college degree just for showing up! On a serious note – thank you both for your years of service to our Commonwealth. I'm humbled to be considered in your company today.

And most importantly, to the class of 2014 and the family, friends, fans and fellow Mustangs gathered here in the audience – congratulations!

Endless hours in Wadsworth and Chamberlayne, late nights at Carlson Café, and now the only thing standing between you and that diploma is me and my speech.

Don't worry. While I would love to share with all of you the vast wisdom I have accumulated in my 33 years on this earth and year and a half in Congress... I will spare you that pleasure and keep this brief.

I have a feeling our graduates will thank me. Yeah, Class of 2014 – those sunglasses aren't fooling anyone.

Commencement addresses are usually chock-full of advice. I know this, because it relates to the one piece of advice I will give you today: if in the future you are ever asked to give a commencement speech, do yourself a favor and avoid Google-ing 'best commencement speeches of all time.'

There is no better way to convince yourself this was a terrible mistake than spending a couple hours watching some of the greatest orators of our time – Stephen Colbert, Oprah and a few Presidents of the United States -impart their years of wisdom and experience on an audience of enraptured graduates.

Not to mention the esteemed Mayor of this City – Setti Warren – who delivered this address last year. Mr. Mayor, I don't care if there are 365 days between us, I still don't like having to follow you in a speaking program!

Graduates, as someone just a bit more than a decade removed from the seats you sit in today, I don't know that I have all that much life-altering wisdom to offer you.

That's not to say the last decade has been without some tough lessons.

I've learned that no matter how many years I spent in rural Latin America as an eager Peace Corps volunteer, I was never going to be mistaken for a local.

I've learned that when you're assigned to sit in the front row in your first class on your first day of law school -- it is a really, really good idea to do the reading.

And I've learned that when a Boston Globe reporter comes to interview you about all you've learned in your first year in Congress, it's best not to get lost in the parking garage on your way to a committee hearing.

But I don't know how useful any of that deep wisdom will be for you, so let's skip the advice.

Your parents, professors and peers can give you all the wisdom and insight you need and if they don't – come find me after and I'll give you the rundown of what I learned on Google.

Instead, I want to ask a favor of you. I know. Some people get funny jokes and good advice, and you get a guy asking you to do something.

But it's important so here it goes: as you walk away from this tight-knit community and embark on the pleasure and pain that is early adulthood, you will find challenges that test your wits, your hearts and your resolve: promotions won, jobs lost, pennies pinched, families raised, hearts broken, homes bought – and every precious moment in between.

The often unglamorous but deeply sacred milestones of growing up and growing old in this country.

But as you come upon those tests, what I ask of you today is that you won't ever let anyone say the following four words to you: *you are too young*.

Make yourself a promise – right here, right now, in this moment unlike any other in the brilliance that is your life. Promise that so long as you are blessed with it, you will wear your youth as a badge of honor.

For the record, I don't mean you should suggest beer pong for the office Christmas party or tell your boss YOLO when he or she asks why you were late to work.

I mean that more than grades, internships or resumes, it is the fresh eyes, new ideas and clear dreams of this generation that are the most valuable assets you can offer the world waiting outside this campus.

In 1966 a young Senator from New York named Robert Kennedy took a trip to South Africa.

There, in the midst of a country mired in apartheid, he told the students who gathered to hear him speak that “a young monk began the Protestant reformation, a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth, and a young woman reclaimed the territory of France. It was a young Italian explorer who discovered the New World, and a 32-year-old Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that all men are created equal.”

“This world demands the qualities of youth,” my grandfather continued. “Not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease. It is a revolutionary world we live in, and thus . . . young people who must take the lead.”

Nearly 50 years later, the need for courage, imagination and risk-taking is as urgent as it has ever been.

But a disturbing human habit has persisted— a tendency to use the word ‘youth’ dismissively; as a way to insinuate a lack of experience, insight or expertise.

Today, thanks to the opportunities you seized in your years here at Mount Ida, you’ve got plenty of all three.

But still, your generation – *our generation* – more than any other before it – has been plagued by doubt and cynicism about what it can accomplish.

There is no lack of opinions on so-called ‘Millenials’ – whether it’s the cover of TIME Magazine declaring us the ‘Me Me Me’ generation or opinion-makers across the globe trying to fit the experience of today’s young people into words like – ‘selfie’ or ‘snapchat.’

We are wildly creative and impossibly self-centered; resourceful and reckless, virtuous and vain.

Of course, the context of our story matters.

I doubt there is a person in this audience who doesn’t remember where they were when the twin towers fell.

We came of age in a country confronted with its own striking vulnerability; shaped by the the long and painful wars that followed; by an economy on its knees and a government ground to a halt in division and dysfunction.

So the cliff notes to our generation have become well-known: unemployment rates higher than our parents and grandparents, home ownership, 401ks and savings accounts at record lows, college debt at a crushing, all-time high.

But, as you have probably learned at some point over these past few years: cliff notes don't tell the whole story.

We grew up in a world where women run boardrooms. Where young African-American men turn to their Mayor, their Governor, and their President and see a face that looks like theirs. Where a young boy immigrates to this country with nothing, grows up on food stamps, and goes on to design a social media app that Facebook would buy one day for *\$19 billion dollars*.

Millenials are more committed to volunteering and public service than any other generation. We're notoriously more attached to the purpose of our work -- rather than the salary it comes with. We're collaborative and cooperative; more inclined to seek change from the ground up, not accept it from the top down.

Our generation – we even look different. You don't have to go any further than the Mt. Ida Class of 2014 to see the stunning diversity that is truly the proud, new face of these United States.

Still, from this day on you will meet person after person inclined to doubt the capability of youth. I speak from some experience. While serving in Congress has certainly given me grey hairs, you've probably noticed I'm on the younger side of folks you traditionally see in elected office.

When I jumped into the race to succeed Congressman Barney Frank two years ago, it was a refrain I heard time and again: He's too young. He's a kid. He doesn't have the experience. Now let me be clear. Experience matters. Wisdom accumulates. Time heals and age softens. Our lives are stories and, graduates, we are in the early chapters. Which means an entire lifetime lies ahead. We'll make some really big mistakes, learn a thing or two, and gain more confidence, intuition and understanding every day.

But as the days and years pass, we'll also lose something. Our youth – that particular mix of fearlessness, hopefulness, and inventiveness shining boldly and brightly in each of you today.

And that's ok. Youth was never ours to claim or keep. Rather, she is passed from one generation to the next. An unspoken understanding that in this country our youngest citizens have *never* failed to show up on the frontlines of our greatest challenges.

It is a lesson woven throughout our history; the spirit Ralph Waldo Emerson captured as he gently honored the generation of young men lost to our country's Civil War:

“So nigh is grandeur to our dust / so near is God to man / when Duty whispers low, *thou must* / the youth replies *I can.*”

In 1954, when nine Supreme Court justices proclaimed that separate was not equal, it was nine African-American school children from Little Rock that marched into an all-white high school and demanded their country prove it.

In 1970, when a war-weary country screamed for peace, it was four college students from Kent State that gave their lives for the cause and thousands more that marched on Washington in their memory, declaring that old enough to fight meant old enough to vote.

In 2001, it was a record number of men and women under the age of 21 that showed up at their local military recruiting offices, signing up to serve their country at the moment she needed them most.

And in 2011, it was a 19-year-old engineering student named Zach Wahls who stood before the Iowa State Legislature and forced a nation to confront it's still unfinished march towards social justice. Facing elected officials two and three times his age, he told them that his beloved family –his sister and his *two moms* – “really isn't so different from yours.”

This is the legacy you pick up today and carry with you on broad shoulders, strengthened by those to your left and right, and supported by the loved ones behind you.

The ‘patient impatience’ of generations of young American men and women who have not been afraid to demand better of their country nor deterred by a long and often rocky road.

There are few certainties in life, but I promise you right now that sometime in these next few years someone will use your age to make you feel small. They’ll say you’re too young to take on more responsibility. Too inexperienced to pitch a big idea. Too green to handle a crisis, too naïve to understand what’s really going on.

When that happens, I hope that you’ll remember the promise we made here today. That you will never let someone else use your age as an excuse to clip your wings.

Class of 2014, your youth is your gift. It is fleeting and fast so own it, cherish it, and put it to work. Use it to be – as Mt. Ida has taught you – “the best version of yourself.”

And if I can add a line to that – use it to make our world better, kinder, and stronger than she has ever been.

You are not too young. You are not too naïve. You are not too inexperienced. You are exactly what your country needs. So hurry up. Your world is waiting.

Congratulations, class of 2014!!