

Reach for the Stars

Graduates, faculty, family and friends of the graduates:

Thank you. It's an honor to be invited to speak at my alma mater. My family came to this area in covered wagons 180 years ago. Now, I live in Orange County, California but I'm proud of my deep Southern Illinois roots.

SIU roots can run deep, too.

Leaving SIU, new diploma and Air Force commission in hand, I headed for pilot training. The first six months of training, no problem. Then a new base, my first jet and an instructor who had a real personality conflict with me.

One of the other instructors in that flight was Captain Maurice "Mo" Abney, SIU graduate also from Marion and someone I had carpooled with a couple of years before.

He said to me one day, "You've got a problem. I can have you transferred to me and I can teach you how to fly. But we're not friends anymore. I'm the instructor, you're the student."

I said, "Yes, you've got a deal, sir!"

The great thing about mentors is that they sometimes see in you, things that you don't see in yourself...at least at first.

Mo's plan worked and has changed the whole course of my life. I graduated, received my wings and an assignment to fly supersonic all-weather fighters. This was one of the toughest, most sought after assignments in the Air Force.

This marked the beginning of a time when I would fly a series of progressively faster supersonic fighters. Thanks SIU graduate, Mo Abney.

Each time I taxied out for my first flight in a new fighter that was from 200 to 400 MPH faster than any thing I had ever flown before, I had the same queasy feeling—"This is one I probably won't be able to handle." Then I'd hear my granddad's voice in my head. "Son if you ain't got a choice, be brave." Pull the trigger and ride the bullet. Suddenly I was airborne.

That's the way with all of us. We're tied with straw and think it's chain.

The fighter I flew the most was the Voodoo F-101B. (Never fly the A model of anything!) It was a 1200 MPH airplane—almost twice the speed of sound. It covered twenty miles per minute. One mile every 3 seconds. Seven football fields in one second.

I could fly from Carbondale:

to St. Louis in six minutes

to Springfield in nine minutes

to Chicago in fifteen minutes.

Much of my test flying was at twenty-five feet and 700 MPH over the Arizona desert with the ground radar site trying to follow me on their scope. If you're ever flying just under the speed of sound at twenty-five feet, here are a couple of helpful hints: (1) the sky's not the limit...the ground is (2) you can only tie the record for flying low.

With ten years to go to retirement I left the Air Force and we moved to Southern California so I could fly with the airlines. It seemed like a real good idea...at the time.

I started calling airlines as soon as we unpacked.

Every call was the same. They'd get excited about my flying time and safety record and they were going to send me an application immediately.

I'd say, "Wait! What are the height requirements for your pilots?"

They'd answer "five feet eight."

I'd say, "That's my goal to be five feet eight!"

Their response, "Thanks for calling."

You people are probably saying, "He doesn't look that short." Watch this! (Step off the box.) In this robe I look like Yoda...or Randal Falker's hand puppet.

With the airlines it was a prejudicial thing. They didn't want passengers saying, "That little guy is gonna fly this big airplane?"

I was going to start an anti-discrimination group called SPOT – Short People On Top. I have applications for several of you I've already spotted here today.

I was running out of airspeed, altitude and ideas at the same time.

In the Air Force I was known as the Sonic Boom Salesman. I spoke to communities that were hit often by sonic booms. It was where I did my first speeches. That's not really true. I took a speech class here at SIU and got a "C" in it. If I'd known I was going to do this for a living, I'd have paid more attention.

If I could sell sonic booms, I could sell anything! So I joined a big Southern California company and sold for a year, then managed a small office for a year. Why they made this next move, I can't tell you. They made me the manager of the #1 office out of thirty-six. In three months we plummeted from #1 to 36th. The company and the people who worked for me were not pleased with my progress.

It was really bad. When I started to pull into the parking lot in the morning, I'd find that my people had arrived there early and blocked all of the entrances with their cars. (The modern day version of circling the wagons as they did in the old West.) I was afraid to put the key into the ignition until I checked all of the wiring. When I got ready to go home at night I'd send my lowest producer out to start my car, while I watched from a safe distance.

My boss said, "I'm looking for your replacement."

I said, "I'm going to have to learn how you do this."

He said, "You don't have much time."

I said, "You don't know how motivated I am."

The newspapers and magazines are always printing stories about successful people. I decided to call those people, take them to lunch and pick their brains for ideas, which I did. (It's something I still enjoy doing.) They gave me plenty of good advice and it worked!

Four months later we were back to #1 and then went on to break many industry production records, all from ideas shared with me by successful people.

It's been an interesting journey but the person I learned the most from, as well as the most interesting person I've ever met, was a real treasure trove named Jim Newton.

Our first meeting of many was when he asked me to speak for two days to his sales force in Ft. Myers, Florida.

He was writing a book at the time called "Uncommon Friends." At twenty (fifty-seven years before I met him) he was a close friend and confidant of Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Dr. Alexis Carrel and Charles Lindbergh, the geniuses who have been called "The Men Who Invented the 20th Century."

The source material for his book was the sixty-five pounds of diaries and journals he wrote as he spent hundreds of hours with these geniuses who were his senior by forty or fifty years.

Through the twenty years of friendship I enjoyed with the Newton's they became like another set of parents to me. I learned so much from these two who had witnessed nearly all of the 20th Century. Late one afternoon watching the sun set over the Gulf of Mexico from their home on the beach, Jim said the best advice he received from his uncommon friends was from Harvey Firestone, founder of the Firestone Tire Company. He said, "Jim, the greatest mistake you can make is underestimating your own potential."

About five years before Jim's death, I said, "Jim, in all of the years we've been friends I've never asked you this question. Did your uncommon friends have any driving forces in common?"

(I was about to learn the biggest lesson I'd ever learned.)

Jim's quick response was, "Yes, all five had three driving forces in common... a sense of purpose, a spirit of adventure and an unending desire for continued personal growth."

So that was the steel thread that ran through these iron willed high achievers.

Sense of Purpose

Washington Irving said, "Great minds have purpose, others have wishes."

Each of these five friends understood he wasn't here to keep it the same but to make things better.

Edison had 1093-patented inventions, an average of one every ten days of his adult life. He once said, "I wish I could live 300 years because I've got enough ideas to fill up the time."

So, graduates, keep in mind, accomplishment is your birthright. Limitations are adopted.

If you ever have trouble getting out of bed in the morning, its because you have no new goals. Everyday is a repeat of the day before.

People say to me I've got a boring job. I explain to them that they don't have a boring job. They've just developed a boring habit in the way they do their job.

Ask yourself often, "What is the person I could become, capable of achieving?" Remember: Don't under estimate your own potential.

I once did a program with Heavyweight Boxing Champion George Foreman. During lunch I started looking at his nose. I thought old George understands pain. I asked him how he stood the pain to become World Heavyweight Boxing Champion. He said, "Danny if I see what I want real good in my mind, I don't notice any pain in getting it."

That's good advice for all of us. In other words if you're experiencing pain in getting what you want; you aren't seeing what you want vividly enough.

Spirit of Adventure

When a personal purpose is selected it will be made up of many smaller segments called goals. Think of this as your North Star Course.

Here are your marching orders:

Decide! Begin! Don't stop!

John Wayne, the great western movie star put it this way: "Bravery is being terrified but saddling up any way."

So starve your fear! Feed your courage! Embrace your adventure! Goals are all up stream. Even a dead fish can go down stream. It takes a live one to go against the current!

John Goddard, a friend of mine and world-class adventurer, when he was fifteen made a list of 127 different adventures he wanted to accomplish during his life. Just one of the goals was to travel the entire length of the Nile River in a kayak. That's over 4000 miles, the distance between Los Angeles and New York. No one had ever done that before. It took him a year to do it but he made it. Now in his late seventies he's done 118 of the list of 127. His motto: "To dream is to dare, to fear is to fail."

Jim Newton said of his friend, Charles Lindbergh, "He took chances but never left anything to chance." In other words, Charles did things no one else had done before but only after he had a careful plan.

When I was doing air shows in my supersonic fighter I did plenty of careful planning. My first pass in front of the crowd was at 700 MPH and 25 feet off the ground. Then after a 180 degree turn came back 100 feet higher and 100 MPH slower but upside down. Keeping in mind when you're inverted your control system is reversed. During an air show, I never wanted to hear myself use the word "ooops!"

Desire for Unending Personal Growth

Make it a lifetime principle to never delay the remedy of any thing that's holding you back. Anything that adds to your effectiveness is cheap no matter what the cost.

Mr. Edison, in his late seventies, was asked by a reporter, "Mr. Edison, when are you going to retire?" With a twinkle in his eye he said, "The day before the funeral."

Read biographies. Take notes. Seek out successful people and pick their brains. Develop a circle of friends, called "triggers." These are people that make you think but not necessarily the way they think.

You'll run into an occasional crisis. The great leadership expert, Peter Drucker said, "A crises must never be experienced...for the second time." So learn from it. Adversity puts iron in your flesh.

Know more than the average person considers necessary. If you prepare half way... you'll find success is in the other half.

A quick look at two "No Limits" people:

Steve Smith

Met him at the Lindbergh Foundation meeting where we were presenting Neal Armstrong the Lindbergh Award that evening.

- Steve showed us a drawing he did at seven of a rocket and capsule. His parents have seventy such drawings he did as a boy.
- Graduated from engineering school.
- Applied at NASA for astronaut training
 - (1) Took test – didn't make it.
 - (2) Two years later took test – didn't make it
 - (3) Two years later took test – didn't make it
(What would you have done?)
 - (4) Two years later took test – didn't make it
(What would you have done?)

IT'S ALWAYS TOO SOON TO QUIT!

- (5) Two years later took 5th test and made it! 10 years after first test.
- Repaired Hubble telescope twice. Four space flights. Seven space walks. 49 ½ hours outside the shuttle with his body traveling at five miles per second.

Jacquelyn Cochran

- Orphan – wasn't sure of her birth year (+ 2 years).
- Lived in abject poverty.
- As a pre-teen worked long hours in a mill.
- At 8 years old (?) got her first pair of shoes.
- No formal education.

Few of her accomplishments after that:

- Founded a worldwide cosmetics company.
- Founded Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASPS).
- First woman to fly a bomber across the Atlantic.
- First woman to fly a jet across the Atlantic.
- First woman to break the sound barrier.
- First woman to fly twice the speed of sound.
- First woman to win Bendix Air Race – in a field of men.
- In one year set nine international speed, altitude and distance records.
- Won the Harmon Trophy (16 times) for “Outstanding Woman of the Year.”
- In addition, talked a close friend, a retired Army General into running for President. His name...General Dwight Eisenhower.
- At her death in 1980 she held more speed and altitude records than anyone else, male or female.
- When asked how she did it, she smiled and said, “I didn't have shoes but I had dreams!”

Four All Important Words

1. Dream
2. Study – there is no saturation to education.
3. Plan
4. Action

The best is yet to be.

The best is on its way.

There are no limits!

Pull the trigger and ride the bullet. Let's go break some records!!!