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To the Graduating Class



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US Senator Kamala D. Harris (D-CA) gave the convocation oration for The 2017 Howard University Commencement Ceremony in Washington, DC on May, 13, 2017.

Commencement Speech to the University of Southern California Class of 2017

By Will Ferrell

Celebrated comedian Will Ferrell, graduate of University of Southern California (1990) delivers the commencement address to the 2017 undergraduate class of USC. Ferrell, who starred on the comedy program Saturday Night Live from 1995 to 2002, and went on to star in a list of successful films, speaks about his time at USC working on his undergraduate degree in sports information and about the early experiences that led to his decision to pursue a comedy career. Ferrell encourages USC graduates to experiment with new fields and interests as they struggle to define themselves and their goals after graduation.

We are SC We are [SC]. We are [SC]. We are [SC]. Thank you. Thank you.

It is such an honor to deliver this year's commencement address to the University of Southern California's graduating class of 2017.

I would like to say thank you, graduates, for that warm welcome. I would also like to apologize to all the parents who are sitting there, saying, "Will Ferrell? Why will Ferrell? I hate Will Ferrell. I hate him. I hate his movies. He's gross. Although he's much better-looking in person. Has he lost weight?"

By the way, that discussion is happening out there right now.

Today I have also received an honorary doctorate, for which I would like to give my thanks to President Max Nikias. I would also like to recognize my esteemed fellow honorary doctorates, Suzanne Dworak-Peck, a great humanitarian and visionary in the field of social work. Dr. Gary Michelson, whose innovation as one of the country's leading orthopedic spinal surgeons has revolutionized this field. Mark Ridley Thomas, a pillar of local and state government for over 25 years. David Ho whose work in AIDS research led him to be *Time* magazine's Man of the Year for 1996. And one of the great actors of our time, Academy-Award winning actress Dame Helen Mirren.

And then there's me. Will Ferrell, whose achievements include running naked through the city of Montrose in *Old School*. Montrose in the house, alright. Running around in my underwear and racing helmet, thinking that I'm on fire as Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights*. Running around in Elf tights eating gum off the ground and playing cowbell. I think my fellow doctorates would agree based on our achievements we are all on equal footing.

Delivered on May 12, 2017 at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

I want the university to know that I do not take this prestigious honor lightly. I've already instructed my wife and my children, from this point on, they have to address me as Dr. Ferrell. There will be no exceptions. Especially at our children's various school functions and when opening Christmas presents. "Yay, we got the new Xbox, thank you Dad! I mean, Dr. Ferrell."

I've been informed that I can now perform minimally invasive surgery at any time or any place, even if people don't want it. In fact, I am legally obligated to perform minor surgery at the end of today's ceremonies, or my doctor's degree will be revoked. So if anyone has a sore tooth that needs to be removed or wants hernia surgery, please meet me at the "surgery center"—by "surgery center" I mean a windowless van I have parked over by the Coliseum.

The next time I'm flying and they ask if there's a doctor on board, I can now confidently leap to my feet and scream, "I'm a doctor, what can I do? Yes, no problem, I can absolutely deliver that baby." Hopefully it will be on United Airlines, in which I will be immediately be subdued and dragged off the aircraft, which we all know will be recorded on someone's iPhone and put on YouTube. You will hear me say, "Call Max Nikias, President of USC. He told me I'm a doctor." Rest assured, President Nikias, I will use my powers wisely.

Although this is my first commencement address I have delivered to an actual university, this is not my first commencement speech. The institutions to which I have spoken at previously include Bryman School of Nursing, DeVry Technical School, Debbie Dudeson School of Trucking, University of Phoenix, Hollywood DJ Academy and Trump University. I am still waiting to get paid from Trump University. In fact, it turns out I owe Trump University money for the honor to speak at Trump University.

You are the graduating class of 2017. And by every statistical analysis you are collectively considered the strongest class ever to graduate from this university. All of you have excelled in various courses of study. All of you, except for four students. And you know exactly who you are. If you would care to stand and reveal yourself right now, that would be great, those four students. There's one. Two. Three, four, five, six, eight, more like 20. Very honest of you.

It is incredibly surreal, one might even say unbelievable, that I get to deliver this address to you. As a freshman in the fall of 1986, if you were to come up to me and say that in the year 2017 you, Will Ferrell, will be delivering the commencement address for USC, I would have hugged you with tears in my eyes.

I then would have asked this person from the future, "Does that mean I graduated?"

"Yes, you did," says the person from the future.

"What else can you tell me about the future?"

Future person turns to me and says, "I can tell you that you will become one of the most famous alumni in this university, mentioned in the same breath as John Wayne, Neil Armstrong and Rob Kardashian. You will be referenced in rap songs from Kanye West, to Little Wayne to Drake." Nas will say, "Get me real bonkers like Will Ferrell on cat tranquilizer."

“Is that it?” I would ask.

“Yes, that sums it up. Except one other thing—in the future there will be something called Shake Shack. It will start in New York and then come to LA and people will wait hours for a milkshake that is definitely good but not that good that you should wait two hours.”

So yes, if I had heard all of that I would have been incredulous at best. But it turns out I did graduate in 1990 with a degree in Sports Information. Yes. You heard me, Sports Information. A program so difficult, so arduous, that they discontinued the major eight years after I left. Those of us with Sports Information degrees are an elite group. We are like the Navy Seals of USC graduates. There are very few of us and there was a high dropout rate.

So I graduate and I immediately get a job right out of college working for ESPN, right? Wrong. No, I moved right back home. Back home to the mean streets of Irvine, California. Yes. Irvine always gets that response. Pretty great success story, right? Yeah, I moved back home for a solid two years, I might add. And I was lucky, actually. Lucky that I had a very supportive and understanding mother, who is sitting out there in the crowd, who let me move back home. And she recognized that while I had an interest in pursuing sportscasting, my gut was telling me that I really wanted to pursue something else. And that something else was comedy.

For you see, the seeds for this journey were planted right here on this campus. This campus was a theater or testing lab if you will. I was always trying to make my friends laugh whenever I could find a moment. I had a work-study job at the humanities audiovisual department that would allow me to take off from time to time. By allow me, I mean I would just leave and they didn't notice. So I would literally leave my job if I knew friends were attending class close by and crash a lecture while in character. My good buddy Emil, who's also here today—Emil, in the house—Emil told me one day that I should crash his Thematic Options literature class one day. So I cobbled together a janitor's outfit complete with work gloves, safety goggles, a dangling lit cigarette, and a bucket full of cleaning supplies. And then I proceeded to walk into the class, interrupting the lecture, informing the professor that I'd just been sent from Physical Plant to clean up a student's vomit. True story.

What Emil neglected to tell me was that the professor of his class was Ronald Gottesman, a professor who co-edited the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Needless to say a big-time guy. A month after visiting my friend's class as a janitor, I was walking through the campus when someone grabbed me by the shoulder and it was Ron Gottesman. I thought for sure he was going to tell me to never do that again. Instead what he told me was that he loved my barging in on his class and that he thought it was one of the funniest things he'd ever seen and would I please do it again? So on invitation from Professor Gottesman I would barge in on his lecture class from time to time as the guy from Physical Plant coming by to check on things, and the professor would joyfully play along.

One time I got my hands on a power drill and I just stood outside the classroom door operating the drill for a good minute. Unbeknownst to me, Professor Gottesman was wondering aloud to his class, “I wonder if we're about to get a visit from

our Physical Plant guy?” I then walked in as if on cue and the whole class erupted in laughter. After leaving, Professor Gottesman then weaved the surprise visit into his lecture on Walt Whitman and the *Leaves of Grass*. Moments like these encouraged me to think maybe I was funny to whole groups of people who didn’t know me, and this wonderful professor had no idea how his encouragement of me—to come and interrupt his class no less—was enough to give myself permission to be silly and weird.

My senior year I would discover a comedy and improv troupe called the Groundlings located on Melrose Avenue. This was the theater company and school that gave the starts to Laraine Newman, Phil Hartman, John Lovitz, Pee Wee Herman, Conan O’Brien, Lisa Kudrow to name a few. Later it would become my home where I would meet the likes of Chris Kattan, Cheri Oteri, Ana Gasteyer, Chris Parnell, Maya Rudolph, Will Forte and Kristin Wiig. I went to one of their shows during the spring semester of my senior year and in fact got pulled up onstage during an audience participation sketch. I was so afraid and awestruck at what the actors were doing that I didn’t utter a word. And even in this moment of abject fear and total failure I found it to be thrilling to be on that stage. I then knew I wanted to be a comedic actor.

So starting in the fall of 1991, for the next three and a half years I was taking classes and performing in various shows at the Groundlings and around Los Angeles. I was even trying my hand at stand-up comedy. Not great stand-up, mind you, but enough material to get myself up in front of strangers. I would work the phones to invite all my SC friends to places like Nino’s Italian Restaurant in Long Beach, the San Juan Depot in San Juan, Capistrano, and the Cannery in Newport Beach. And those members of my Trojan family would always show up. My stand-up act was based mostly on material derived from watching old episodes of *Star Trek*. My opening joke was to sing the opening theme to *Star Trek*. [Sings]

Thank you. Not even funny, just weird. But I didn’t care, I was just trying to throw as many darts at the dartboard, hoping that one would eventually stick. Now don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t extremely confident that I would succeed during this time period, and after moving back to LA there were many a night where in my LA apartment, I would sit down to a meal of spaghetti topped with mustard, with only \$20 in my checking account and I would think to myself, “Oh well I can always be a substitute schoolteacher.” And yes, I was afraid. You’re never not afraid. I’m still afraid. I was afraid to write this speech. And now, I’m just realizing how many people are watching me right now, and it’s scary. Can you please look away while I deliver the rest of the speech?

But my fear of failure never approached in magnitude my fear of what if. What if I never tried at all?

By the spring of 1995 producers from *Saturday Night Live* had come to see the current show at the Groundlings. After two harrowing auditions and two meetings with executive producer Lorne Michaels, which all took place over the course of six weeks, I got the word I was hired to the cast of *Saturday Night Live* for the ’95-’96 season.

I couldn't believe it. And even though I went on to enjoy seven seasons on the show, it was a rocky beginning for me. After my first show, one reviewer referred to me as "the most annoying newcomer of the new cast." Someone showed this to me and I promptly put it up on the wall in my office, reminding myself that to some people I will be annoying. Some people will not think I'm funny, and that that's okay. One woman wrote to me and said she hated my portrayal of George W. Bush. It was mean-spirited, not funny and besides you have a fat face. I wrote her back and I said, I appreciate your letter and she was entitled to her opinion, but that my job as a comedian especially on a show like *Saturday Night Live* was to hold up a mirror to our political leaders and engage from time to time in satirical reflection. As for my fat face, you are 100% right. I'm trying to work on that. Please don't hesitate to write me again if you feel like I've lost some weight in my face.

The venerable television critic for the *Washington Post* Tom Shales came up to me during my last season of the show. He told me congratulations on my time at the show and then he apologized for things he had written about me in some of his early reviews of my work. I paused for a second before I spoke, and then I said, "How dare you, you son of a bitch?" I could tell this startled him, and then I told him I was kidding, and that I'd never read any of his reviews. It was true, I hadn't read his reviews. In fact I didn't read any reviews because once again, I was too busy throwing darts at the dartboard, all the while facing my fears.

Even as I left *SNL*, none of the studios were willing to take a chance on me as a comedy star. It took us three years of shopping *Anchorman* around before anyone would make it. When I left *SNL* all I really had was a movie called *Old School* that wouldn't be released for another year, and a sub-par script that needed a huge rewrite about a man raised by elves at the North Pole.

Even now I still lose out on parts that I want so desperately. My most painful example was losing the role of Queen Elizabeth in the film *The Queen*. Apparently it came down to two actors, myself and Helen Mirren. The rest is history. Dame Helen Mirren, you stole my Oscar!

Now one may look at me as having great success, which I have in the strictest sense of the word, and don't get me wrong, I love what I do and I feel so fortunate to get to entertain people. But to me, my definition of success is my 16-and-a-half-year marriage to my beautiful and talented wife, Vivica. Success are my three amazing sons, Magnus, 13, Matthias, 10 and Axel age 7. Right there, stand up guys, take a bow, there you go.

Success to me is my involvement in the charity Cancer for College, which gives college scholarships to cancer survivors, started by my great friend and SC alum Craig Pollard, a two-time cancer survivor himself, who thought of the charity while we were fraternity brothers at the Delt house, up on West Adams. Craig was also one of the members of my Trojan family sitting front-and-center at my bad stand-up comedy shows, cheering me on.

No matter how cliché it may sound you will never truly be successful until you learn to give beyond yourself. Empathy and kindness are the true signs of emotional

intelligence, and that's what Viv and I try to teach our boys. Hey Matthias, get your hands of Axel right now! Stop it. I can see you. Okay? Dr. Ferrell's watching you.

To those of you graduates sitting out there who have a pretty good idea of what you'd like to do with your life, congratulations. For many of you who maybe don't have it all figured out, it's okay. That's the same chair that I sat in. Enjoy the process of your search without succumbing to the pressure of the result. Trust your gut, keep throwing darts at the dartboard. Don't listen to the critics and you will figure it out.

Class of 2017, I just want you to know you will never be alone on whatever path you may choose. If you do have a moment where you feel a little down just think of the support you have from this great Trojan family and imagine me, literally picture my face, singing this song gently into your ear: *If I should stay, I would only be in your way. So I'll go, but I know, I'll think of you every step of the way. And I will always love you, will always love you, will always love you, Class of 2017. And I will always love you.*

Thank you, fight on!

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