

UNIVERSITY OF TAMPA COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

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MEMBER OF ADVENT HEALTH MEDICAL GROUP, VASCULAR SURGEON
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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Ron Vaughn, First Lady Renee Vaughn, honored guests, esteemed faculty, administration, parents, families and friends, and, most importantly, the 2024 graduating class of the University of Tampa: I am truly honored to be here.

As you stand at the precipice of a future filled with remarkable opportunity, it's truly worth taking a moment to recognize the unique contributions each of the disciplines represented here today brings to the tapestry of human knowledge and societal advancement. HEALTH SCIENCES GRADUATES, you are the guardians of our well-being, ready to innovate in the face of medical challenges. SOCIAL SCIENCE SCHOLARS, your insights into the human condition prepare you to shape policies and understandings that will guide us toward creating and sustaining a more equitable society. MATHEMATICIANS, your analytical prowess equips you to solve complex problems and drive technology forward, while EDUCATORS, you are the torchbearers of enlightenment, nurturing the next generation to reach their fullest potential. Together, your diverse expertise is the cornerstone of a healthier, wiser, and more just world, a collective whose shared belief of a common humanity unites us all as determined caregivers.

Graduates, I sat where you are now sitting, proudly wearing that telltale cap and gown, only what seems a short time ago. Truth be told, a bit more water has passed under my bridge than yours, and with that passage has come many mile markers and many lessons. And so, in the spirit of giving – me to you, and you to those you'll now go forward and serve – I hope to share with all of you today some valuable takeaways I've collected during my journey.

Today marks a momentous occasion, a celebration of achievement, hard work, and dreams realized. To all the graduates seated here today, I offer my heartfelt congratulations on your

remarkable accomplishments. You have each earned the right to be here, and it is with great pride that we – all of us here today, including the distinguished faculty and administration associated with this amazing institution - acknowledge your success.

You should know that, in attending The University of Tampa (UT), you are fortunate to have learned at a school that boasts an inspiring history. In 1931, Tampa Junior College was founded by Frederic H. Spaulding, former principal at Hillsborough High School, bringing higher education to Tampa during the Great Depression when many high school graduates could not afford to attend college away from home. It began with limited degree options and, before it could afford a campus, it held evening classes at Hillsborough High School, not too far from where you now sit.

In 1933, Tampa Junior College moved to the historic Tampa Bay Hotel, an iconic symbol of Tampa's past, built by Henry B. Plant in 1891. The city's decision to repurpose the hotel breathed new life into the college. This move transformed Tampa Junior College into the University of Tampa, expanding its academic offerings. In 1941, UT secured a 99-year lease on the property for \$1 a year, renaming the main building Plant Hall in honor of its history. The southeast wing became the Henry B. Plant Museum. Fast forward to today, and I am proud to remind you that, just like I did decades ago, and my father did decades before me, you are graduating from an institution that stands as a testament to vision and education's transformative power.

I am deeply honored and truly humbled to have the privilege of addressing you on behalf of this great university. Before I continue and spend a few minutes imparting what will hopefully be viewed as words of wisdom, I want to first express that all of us owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to President Ron Vaughn, whose strident leadership has been a beacon for the University of Tampa for the past forty years, thirty years as its president. When Dr. Vaughn took the helm as UT president, the university faced some daunting challenges, but through his leadership, commitment, and vision the school has first risen and then taken flight, increasing its enrollment from approximately 2,400 students to over 11,000 students, increasing its endowment, and improving its already enviable standards, establishing itself as a true "landmark of learning." Dr. Vaughn, thank you to you and your team for all you have done for this university which is loved by so many. Dr. Vaughn, as you retire, know that your legacy will serve

as an inspiration and a model for those who will follow. To you and First Lady Renee Vaughn, know that all gathered here today wish you the very best in retirement. Enjoy this new chapter and may it be filled with many new adventures. I must also extend my sincerest thanks to the Board of Trustees, the selection committee, the dedicated faculty, parents, families and friends of our graduates, whose unwavering support has been pivotal. And to you, the graduates, I am profoundly grateful for this extraordinary honor.

We are certainly here today to honor your scholastic achievements. Yet, this occasion is more than a mere celebration; it is a vital moment where you cast your eyes ahead to the expanse of possibilities that await you. Graduates, as you stand on the cusp of a new chapter, I ask you not to let this moment slide by; rather, I ask you to use this opportunity to engage in introspection. Contemplate the enduring mark you wish to leave on the world. The path to forging your legacy starts **RIGHT NOW** — not at some indeterminate point in the future.

In sculpting your legacy, I urge you to consider the path of public service, a path that epitomizes the essence of selflessness. This is the path where one's own interests are set aside to elevate the common good, a manifestation of humanity's highest virtues. Recall the profound insight of **Mark Twain, who asserted, "The two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you realize why."** Seize each dawn as a fresh opportunity to grow and to refine your purpose. Through this continuous self-improvement, you become a catalyst for change, positively influencing the lives of others and, by extension, shaping the fabric of society.

I invite you to embrace not just the concept, but the **practice** of sacrifice. One would be blind to the reality that living in a capitalist society doesn't require that one earn one's daily bread – and hopefully then some! – but true fulfillment arises not from the accumulation of wealth or possessions, but from the joy of giving—of prioritizing the well-being of others above your own ambitions. As you forge ahead into the complexities of the world, it is my hope that you are guided by a spirit of benevolence and altruism. Carry forward the torch of generosity, igniting the path for others to follow and creating ripples of kindness that extend far beyond your immediate reach.

Remember, the act of sacrifice is not merely about giving up something of value; it's about investing in something greater. It's the labor of love that plants trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit. It's the commitment to causes that matter; the dedication to a life of service that elevates not just oneself but lifts entire communities. As you embark on this journey, know that the sacrifices you make and the service you render are the most profound expressions of your legacy. They are the footprints you will leave on the sands of time, a testament to a life lived with purpose and heart.

Let me share the story of a man who embodied these very principles—my father, Xavier F. Cannella Sr., a proud graduate of the University of Tampa in 1941, who devoted 40 remarkable years to the school children he served as an educator. But what I just shared with you is a mere headline. Let me tell you a bit more about the life of this extraordinary man, because I believe that by doing so, I will have held up for you a model of conduct that anyone of us could proudly emulate.

In a world where self-interest often prevails, Xavier Francis Cannella Sr. stood out as a beacon of altruism, a humanitarian who continuously placed service to others above himself. He recognized the untapped potential within every individual, irrespective of their background. My father was a guiding light in Tampa's education sector, positively impacting countless lives as a dedicated principal. **His one unshakeable principle was simple yet profound: "Do the right thing."** This ethos was not only his professional mantra but also a lesson imparted to his sons, my older brother, Michael A. Cannella '73 M.Ed.'75 and me, Xavier F. Cannella Jr. '78. It cannot be said strongly enough that we remember and take to heart our father's unwavering commitment to honesty, integrity, community, and his schoolchildren.

My father was born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., growing up during the Great Depression. He found his second home in Tampa upon arriving in 1937, where he pursued a bachelor's degree at UT, graduating in 1941, followed by distinguished service in the U.S. Army achieving the rank of sergeant during World War II.

His pursuit of knowledge led him to Columbia University for a master's degree in 1946 and subsequent post-graduate studies at Harvard University, culminating in a professional diploma from Columbia in 1955. My father's journey in education began as a teacher. He married my mother, Phyllis Marie Puleo, an accomplished violinist who was a member of the University of Tampa Symphony Orchestra and the Tampa Symphony Orchestra, often serving as concert master. They shared the love of music and opera and devoted much of their time to charitable organizations.

My father served as principal at three Hillsborough County elementary schools, most notably at Oak Park Elementary, where he served from 1962 until his retirement in 1975. As his son, I can tell you with conviction that he was deeply committed to the wellbeing and education of his students, particularly those from poor inner-city and rural areas. He believed wholeheartedly in the lasting impact of early education. His approach to education transcended all socioeconomic barriers. He provided breakfast for the hungry, shoes for the barefoot, and, above all, dignity and respect for every child. No heart went untouched by this commitment of both knowledge and people. He implemented these programs long before the government did.

My father's legacy was memorialized in 1993 with the dedication of Xavier F. Cannella Elementary School, a fitting tribute to a man whose life's work was the embodiment of humanitarianism and educational excellence. As well, the Xavier F. Cannella Sr. Foundation was established, as a non-profit corporation, dedicated to creating merit and need-based scholarships for future educators. The Foundation has resulted in the creation of the Xavier F. Cannella Sr. Endowed Scholarship at UT. My father passed away in 1984, but his gifts to those who follow in his footsteps continue to inspire and evoke gratitude in the hearts of many. I know that he lives on in my heart, and I hope that the little I've shared about him with you today will move you to accomplish great things. I hope that his example will kindle a fire in your hearts, one that will burn with an ever-increasing intensity because, at the end of the day, **commitment to the well-being of others is "the right thing to do."**

My father's dedication to humanity led me on my own personal journey toward the noble realm of medicine. From my earliest memories, the profound impact a physician can have become

more apparent. It is the caregiver who sees a patient at their most vulnerable times. It is the caregiver whose knowledge, skill, and compassion can make the difference. This is what attracted me to become a physician.

A surgeon can have a direct impact on the lives of their patients. At times, this impact is immediate, as surgical emergencies often arise requiring immediate intervention. This is especially true in the field of vascular surgery. It is the bond of trust between patient and surgeon which is sacred, placing your life in the hands of, at times, a total stranger. This is what happens on a daily basis in the field of surgery. This is a bond of trust built on compassion, empathy, and total commitment to the patient. It is difficult to describe the satisfaction that coming to the aid of your fellow human being brings. It is a long road in getting to the point where you can independently care for patients, I can tell you it is well worth the years of sacrifice, education, and training. In the words of Hippocrates, the father of medicine who lived during the 5th century B.C., and I quote:

I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug. I will remember that I remain a member of society with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm.

I strongly believe these words can effectively guide us all in making worthy and valuable choices. As a physician, I can attest that I've done my utmost to heed these words of wisdom. The benefits have never been long in coming. The satisfaction derived from alleviating the suffering of those in our care, from healing wounds both physical and unseen, cannot be overstated. In the practice of medicine, every individual should be accorded the utmost dignity and respect, irrespective of their status, for in the eyes of humanity, we are all peers.

To our esteemed graduates, I say: Seek out your purpose, lay the foundation of your enduring legacy. Recognize that when twilight descends upon each day, it is the deeds we've done for others that will shine brightest in the firmament of our contentment. Commit to a life of public service, dedicate yourself to the welfare of your fellow beings, and strive to enhance the lives around you—this is where you will truly make an indelible impact. This will bring you true satisfaction. And perhaps above all, know that our interdependence is our greatest strength; that

in our diversity, we possess the power and the potential to create positive, seismic shifts in a world so desperately in need of change.

Remember the timeless words of Maya Angelou: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.’ Let this insight guide your actions, and may your journey be marked by the unforgettable warmth and compassion you bestow upon the world.

Graduates, this is what it means to build a legacy. As you venture forth, remember that your actions, no matter how small, can have a profound effect on the lives of others. Let your legacy be defined by how you uplift those around you, how you lead with compassion, and how you contribute to the greater good.

As you stand here on the threshold of a new chapter in your lives, graduates, I want to leave you with a simple yet profound message. As you step into the world, armed with knowledge and dreams, remember the time-tested character traits that have shaped generations before you – self-sacrifice, dignity, and doing the right thing.

So, graduates, as you embark on this journey of a lifetime, carry with you the torch of self-sacrifice, let your dignity be your armor, and always choose to do the right thing. In doing so, you will not only honor the legacy of those who came before you but also forge a path of integrity, compassion, and goodness for the generations that will follow. Congratulations graduates, and may your futures be as bright as your character is strong.

THANK YOU