**UNIVERSITY OF TAMPA SPEECH**

Hello University of Tampa’s Class of 2023!!

I want to begin by saying that there have been few graduating classes more prepared to face the world than the Class of 2023. You have had to overcome challenges that others could not have imagined, and yet you showed yourself to be adaptable, creative, and determined. And I cannot wait to see what happens when you take the life lessons that you learned in your sophomore year and time at University of Tampa and apply them to your careers, to your communities, and to your families. I am so proud to be standing before you today, and I salute you!

Well here I am and there you are, the Class of 2023! I will keep my remarks brief as I know you all have parents, plans and parties – in that order. And I say that not in judgement, but with a great deal of envy.

First, I want to share my journey as a point of hope and reference, rather than an attempt to make it into the annals of boring commencement addresses. Lastly, I will share some observations and advise from my 63 years on this earth. Now I need you to focus, because no doubt you are all now thinking ‘What the hell? They bring this senior citizen in to give US advise on our futures? She is older than our parents!’ So I ask you all to remind yourselves that I am the mayor and I did graduate from the University of Tampa.

Here we go. I am one of five children who grew up here in Tampa. My parents never told me that I should or could not do anything that wasn’t a typical female role. I like to believe that it was because my parents were very wise, but it more than likely was because I was the fourth out of five kids and they were tired.

So the fact that I was six foot tall in the second grade and grew up playing sports with my brothers and all the boys in the neighborhood made me a pretty good athlete. Next, add in Title 9, which makes all of your heads go hmmm. Title 9 was passed 51 years ago and said a lot of things, but most importantly for me, it said there could be no sex discrimination in sports. Any female athletes here? Say thank you to Title 9.

As a result, I participated in every organized sport there was in junior and high school. My senior year I was given the opportunity of a lifetime when Coach Betty Lambert offered me a full scholarship to play volleyball and basketball at UT. This may not sound significant, but when you consider five kids on a cabinetmaker’s salary, it meant everything. So began the journey. August 16, 1977 was my first day of college and, coincidently the day Elvis Presley died.

I like to refer to my time at the University of Tampa as the BRV, or Before Ron Vaugh Period. With the exception of the minarets, Plant Hall and the Rathskeller, the UT of today holds little resemblance to the UT I attended. We played our games in the Howell Gymnasium which was located where Tampa Prep is today. We were the only college team I know of that could be rained out of an indoor basketball game. I’m not sure if the gym was torn down or just fell in, but I do know that the Benson Alex Riseman Fitness and Recreation Center is a few steps above. The resident halls, Delo and Howell, were an inch away from condemnation. Despite the physical conditions, it was the most impactful time of my life.

What Dr. Ron Vaughn has accomplished in his time at the University of Tampa is remarkable. He is a true visionary leader and we all owe him a debt of gratitude! UT is now the crown jewel in the City of Tampa and it as all because of his tireless dedication and effort through the years. Dr. Vaughn you have our undying respect and gratitude.

My wish for each of you graduating today is that your experience at the University of Tampa was as rewarding as mine. Your education is priceless and is something that will provide value every day of your life. You have grown and matured, developed skills that will carry you successfully through the years, created relationships – some that will fade and others that will last a lifetime. And, in all likelihood, had more fun without any money than you will ever have again – especially once you become gainfully employed. Bottom line, life is about many things, but mostly about learning and relationships.

As you have grown so has our city. Just as you’ve spent the past four years as a student, I've had the honor of spending the past four years as Mayor of this great city. In a way, we’ve been through our journeys together. We’ve seen *a lot* of change in a very short time.

We made it through a global pandemic and watched as people and businesses moved here in record-breaking numbers.

Entire neighborhoods have been built. We have a vibrant urban core, Water Street, Armature Works, Midtown and so much more development in progress. We’ve had several visits by President Biden, one at the University of Tampa. Taylor Swift broke the internet, but didn’t have quite enough time to be mayor for a day.

And among the most important achievements was our designation as Champa Bay!! Winning two Stanley Cups and a Superbowl was beyond thrilling. We even invented the boat parade celebration.

Tampa is thriving, and you all have had a front row view of this historic, transformational change.

Now, some advice from the Class of 81. First and foremost, be kind. As the song says, put a little love in your heart. It takes way too much energy to be angry and, fact is, nobody wants to be around negative people. Change the national dialogue one person at a time.

Try new things. Step out of your comfort zone. I had the good fortune of stumbling into my passion. Federal Service was in my future when a freeze on hiring went into effect. So some friends from UT who had become officers at the Tampa Police Department encouraged me to join TPD. I became a police officer without any knowledge or exposure to law enforcement. And I was blessed to be in a profession that I loved. There was never a day, in 31 years of service, that I did not want to go to work. I wish the same for each of you, but in all likelihood it will take more than one and possibly many attempts to find your passion. Don’t be in a hurry to find your way, both personally and professionally.

Understand your social responsibility. Save our environment. As you move through life, help guide someone else. Vote Vote Vote, it makes a difference and, fact is, people died for your right to vote. Prove the old people wrong, by showing that you can and will leave a positive mark on your community.

Remember that inclusivity and diversity are *strengths*. Tampa is a melting pot of cultures and backgrounds. One of my favorite things about Tampa is how we all live, work, and play together.

Our diversity is what makes our community vibrant and successful. Here in Tampa, we embrace and celebrate our diversity. Imagine how boring would life be if we were all the same.

My dermatologist would like me to advise you all to wear sunscreen. My 63 year old self stands as a testament to that advise. Trust me on this, I woke up one day and had my Grandma Effie’s skin. Sure wish I had her laugh instead. So be kind to your body AND wear sunscreen.

Life is short, do now what you will wish you had done when you are old. Your generation has it right – understanding that money does not equal happiness and there is a balance between work life and personal life which, in fact, benefits both. Don’t put things off for another day or time, as it may never come. I have a good friend named Jill. I could call her at 2 in the morning and say ‘hey you want to go to a party, or you want to have a beer, or what do you think about hang gliding … anything at all and she would say ‘sure I will be over in a few minutes’. Be Jill.

Stay humble. I had a coach who told me to always practice to be the best and play to be the best, but never tell anyone you are the best. Just let them figure it out on their own. This adage can apply to every aspect of your life.

Take time to be thankful. Thankful for what you have received and where you are today. No one arrived here without the help of others. Be grateful and say thank you to someone this afternoon and every day here after. Gratitude is a wonderful characteristic and looks good on everyone.

I wish each of you all the success life can bring, but will share that it is through failures large and small that you learn the most valuable lessons in life. As JK Rowling said; It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all, in which case you have failed by default. Don’t be afraid to try. Success is often found hiding behind a failure.

Give people a chance. The University of Tampa took a chance on a skinny 17 year old and offered me a college education. That opportunity was the key that has opened so many doors on the path to becoming Tampa’s 59th Mayor. Give someone a chance by opening a door.

These simple lessons have served me well, and I hope you find some value in them too. As you leave here today, you will officially become a part of the workforce and active citizens in our community. Your education here at The University of Tampa is an incredible foundation for the brightest future ahead.

As I close I ask you to please remember this - your education has been a dress rehearsal for a life that is yours to lead. Make the most of every moment!

Congratulations Class of 2023! We are counting on you to change the world.