

Op-Ed: Best Wishes to the Class of 2020

High school graduation is a time for reflection, celebration, and preparation. The class of 2020 is achieving this milestone at a challenging moment for our nation and our world. While the ability to celebrate may be curtailed, graduates still have the ability to reflect and prepare. As a result, I thought I'd take the opportunity to share some observations and suggestions.

First and foremost, it is important to remember where you come from. The values I learned growing up in a small, blue-collar Wisconsin town shaped who I am today. I learned about the golden rule, the value of honesty and hard work, and the importance of compassion. I know these values are alive and well in Central and Western Wisconsin, and it's important that the class of 2020 carry them wherever their journey takes them next.

It's also important to be aware of the opportunities that surround us. You don't have to leave Central or Western Wisconsin to pursue success. There are many fine universities, colleges, and technical schools here, as well as a number of family-supporting jobs with excellent employers. COVID-19 has thrown up obstacles, but our communities are built to rebound – and the class of 2020 can be a big contributor to our region's success.

As today's graduates enter the workforce or take the next step forward in their academic journey, they should understand that hard work is the best prerequisite for success – but it makes no guarantees. Many of us were raised hearing that we could be anything we wanted to be if we just worked hard. “Always follow your dreams,” we were told. Unfortunately, following your dreams doesn't mean you'll catch them. Sometimes, you can work hard, be smarter, better, and more talented – and still fail.

This isn't meant to discourage – only to prepare people for when things don't work out. Not everyone who fails is lazy. We've all known people – talented people - who worked hard to reach a goal, failed, and then gave up. The key is to never give up. Success is not guaranteed to those who work hard, but failure is almost certain if you don't. There are many ways to fail, but in my experience, there is only one way to succeed.

Ben Stein once said “It is inevitable that some defeat will enter even the most victorious life. The human spirit is never finished when it is defeated...it is finished when it surrenders.”

Success is almost never an accident. It happens on purpose, and it comes from honesty and hard work. We all run into challenges. Those challenges alone don't determine the outcome. Outcomes are determined by the decisions you make when confronted by obstacles. Do you choose to surrender? Or do we keep pushing?

Remember what you learned, let the values you've learned guide you, and work hard in pursuit of your goals. Congratulations, graduates!