

Mansfield University Commencement Speech 5/2/2009
By Wanda L. Stroud

I want you to do me a favor.

In the first job interview in which someone asks you: “how has your education at Mansfield prepared you to work for this company?”

I want you to answer in the most lighthearted and sincere manner possible: “not only did I attend classes and do well; I did so in ten foot snow drifts, negative temperatures, on a 90-degree incline two miles from my dorm room by foot.”

We all can agree that attending a school with a street called “cardiac hill” stands as testament to the tenacity that we developed while at Mansfield. Striving for an education under other-than-posh conditions and succeeding is evidence of the hard work that each and every one of you is capable of doing.

In case you're wondering, I am here today for two reasons: to stand with the rest of the folks who are proud of what you have accomplished—mom and dad, aunt, uncle, grandparents—we're like the Verizon team standing behind you. The scenes are all too familiar to me: mom and dad in the audience dabbing the tear from the corner of their eye while reviewing the architectural plans to take over your room! Don't think that we don't know! The bankers who now see you as an asset which will enhance the accounts receivable side of their accounting books as you all start paying back your school loans.

I am also here to show you that, beyond the school loan world, your education at Mansfield has made you an asset and that this Mansfield experience works. As an alum, which you are also about to become, we share the fact that our dorms were located at the bottom of a giant hill and the classes were located at the top of the hill. Just like you, I made the same hike. I was a little closer to the classrooms than some of you when I lived in Laurel where my sorority, Alpha Sigma Alpha, was

located. And, maybe like you, I wondered why this climb to classes didn't become an official Olympic event.

The timing is right for us to meet today because I faced what many of you are facing—a tough economy with a high unemployment rate. When I started here in 1979 (did I give away my age?—I hate when that happens!), retrenchment on campus was the buzz word as the school had to cut its budget and reduce the number of faculty members. As you know and as we knew then, the student/teacher ratio at this school is awesome and not found at the larger schools. When I finished college, the economy was yet to come out of a ten-year stint. Lower and middle management in corporations was not to be found and my expectations were high—after all, I just spent four years and a ton of money that should have prepared me for those positions.

I hope, as I stand here with you, that I can share some knowledge that might work for you. I didn't choose a consistent career path, primarily because I didn't make the conviction to follow my heart and pursue the

career to which I was attracted. Those ugly feelings of failing would pop into my brain. Plus, I blamed everyone but me—I blamed the college for not better preparing me, I blamed the fact that I didn't know anyone in the industry who could hire me. As such, I spent the last twenty plus years in a variety of roles: I worked for the private sector; I worked for the public sector. I did blue collar work; I did white collar work. I worked for a Top Fortune 500 corporation; and I currently run a small business. I was a follower, now I'm a leader. While I won't recommend this chaotic course of action for others, I hope what I've learned can help you to move along smoother in your career. I was the poster child for the bumper sticker that says "not all those who wander are lost". Except that I may have been lost at times!

The most important rule, no matter how bad the economy, is this:

'Those who are employable will always be employed.'

Even if...even if the economy is terrible. Even if, you didn't graduate in the top ten from an ivy-league college (I met a bunch of them during my 7-year stint at The Walt Disney Company—don't let those Harvard grads bother you, your tenacity will outweigh their soft life—their campus is a little flatter!). Even if, you had a tough childhood and nothing ever went right for you. Even if.

Because I will tell you after years of running a business, a great employee is a rare commodity and a much needed one. Here are the character traits of an employable person—if you don't have these traits develop them quickly: be dependable (you report to work at 7:45, not 8:01), be self-disciplined, be low-maintenance (business owners don't like drama), be determined, be the first to admit a mistake you made, be indispensable.

I can guarantee you that even if your company closes its doors, your boss, your mentor, or an executive who noticed your hard work will open a window. I've seen this happen to my friend—an executive

secretary. When her boss moved up and when he moved to another company, she was asked to come along with more money and a higher title. She was indispensable.

And I've experienced a positive job change because someone above my boss saw a potential that my boss didn't. I was working in the Transportation Squadron while serving in the United States Air Force at the time. I volunteered to work in the Historian office a few hours a week and got the opportunity to assist the Historian in writing several sections of the wing history. Those in charge of the history program at the higher headquarters were so impressed with what I accomplished that they did the impossible in the military and changed my job classification. Now, if none of this happens to you, you dust the dirt off your feet, don't look back, don't burn bridges, and start your own business and show 'em how it's done! It can be done. My husband started our business when he was 25 years old, an age when risk isn't a deterrent or a roadblock.

So, remember, those who are employable will always be employed.

I want you to do two things that will help you during this economic turmoil...or at any time that an obstacle blocks your career path:

1. Navigate the waters and use the time until the economy recovers and opens greater career doors to you. Use the time to gain extra notches on your belt, especially if you find yourself on the bottom rung of the ladder. Use the time to pick up a few extra evening classes that could make you more promotable; use the time to help a co-worker (with permission of your supervisor) on a project that exposes you to a part of the company that your current job doesn't (just like my military job example); use the time to volunteer for work-related or non-work-related projects or events to further refine your leadership and work skills. In a casual way, make sure your supervisor knows about it. I constantly ask my company supervisors if the employees on their teams have done anything outside the company that we could note as a strength that the

company could tap into and utilize. We use these skills as a factor in reviewing an employee's potential for promotion. In fact, I recently promoted a person to a supervisory position knowing she served as president of her college sorority and believing she could handle the new position because of her leadership experience. Know though that human resource laws prevent employers from knowing about the private lives of employees. So you have to make the call as to when and where you toot your own horn.

Use the time to prepare yourself for an economic upswing and the up-and-coming lower and middle management positions by being the best performer and by being proactive with questions, suggestions, and willingness to help with an ugly task. No matter what your job or career, I want you to do it better than anyone else. If you don't like what you're doing, still do it better than anyone else while promising yourself a goal of moving on within a set time limit.

Most importantly, use the time to observe (don't act like you've lived on the planet for hundred years and know everything—I've been there!). With the last great company mega-merger and with the fall of large companies under their own weight, I predict small businesses will pop-up. While I might sound like an advocate for small businesses, your career will get a great jumpstart in a small business quicker than it will in a large corporation where you will hit glass ceilings at too many intervals and not be given the opportunity to learn all facets of a business. Observe trends (know that people re-live history every 25-30 years—such as clothing styles, music trends, home decorating colors, and global concerns). Observe what people need and want. Through this observation, you could find an opportunity to maybe launch your own company on the side as you work at a not-so-ideal job. Or, you could see a strong career opportunity that will catch the next wave of trends. You must always be forecasting—know where your company is and where it's heading. Know where you are and where you're

heading. Careers and jobs should not be a surprise if you're constantly observing.

And while you're navigating the waters and using the time, above all else, don't complain. I worked with several wonderful World War II veterans who volunteered at the military base where I was assigned. Bob, one of the veteran volunteers at our base museum told me the story of the time his aircraft was under fire. Shrapnel from the metal penetrated his foot through the gas pedal. He had to endure the pain until he got to a landing strip, then he had to land the plane with his foot fused to the pedal. If Bob could do his job under such conditions, we certainly can stare hard work in the face and do it.

2. The next thing to help you over this hump is odd, especially with Mr. Banker being excited about you paying back school loans. I want you to donate—donate your time, donate your money. Find a creditable, worthy cause that you could enjoy.

Unlike the other volunteer project or event that will make you look good with your company, this donation is your secret. I don't want you to boost about this one. I want you to do this because it's important that you think beyond yourself. You spent the last 21 years depending on others to some extent. I want you to 'play forward' and I tell you why. I can't explain with scientific studies how it works or why it works. All I can tell you is that what you contribute to someone other than you comes back to you ten-fold and then some.

I was in high school before I made \$10 a week in an allowance from my parents doing hard work like cleaning the house and helping my dad trim the grass around the trees on 7 acres! There were a lot of trees and we didn't have weed whackers in those days! (I learned to suffer!) But, every other month or so, I sent a check for \$15-20 to an organization that educated American Indian children.

My husband and I, when we were first married, rubbed pennies together just to pay the California rent which was a gazillion dollars for just a one bedroom apartment. Our military pay wasn't a gazillion dollars. But, we both continued to donate our time and money however small the contribution was. Twenty years later, through hard work and good 'ole Mansfield tenacity, we were able to give Mansfield University a substantial donation and, at the same time, enjoy a wonderful life. This is an example of the ten-fold and then some.

My husband and I came from families who knew what it was like to use food stamps and government aid at times. So, we had modest beginnings. When we both attended Mansfield, we worked in various campus jobs. I was a waitress at a local restaurant in town. Although, and I don't know how we had time, we met at a Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity party. Through the years, we made sacrifices and we lived within our means. When business was poor,

we took a pay cut. When times were better, we invested and put money away for the next downturn.

More often than not, we need to put life in perspective. You might think that you're in the deepest hole until you look through an opening and see an even deeper hole next to you. Experiencing first hand that someone else is in a worse situation than you make your problem insignificant. More than that, your desire to help someone else distracts you from you.

The reality is: your Mansfield experience is not a suit that turns you into a superhero overnight. Your diploma is not a shield that will protect you from job rejection. The tassel will not rope the next available executive position. The steps you take on this stage today will not replace the steps that you must endure out there. However, you spent the last four years fine-tuning who you are; absorbing a much-needed knowledge that will give your employer a fresh edge; and developing people skills. If you

can survive a tough roommate situation, a co-worker issue will be a breeze.

I want you to leave here with goals and a plan, not immediate expectations, in order for your Mansfield experience to work. Your life on this campus, whether you've realized it or not, has further defined who you are. Your goals and a plan should be a little more obvious because your heart will be tugged in a particular direction or won't be tugged in a particular direction. Don't be distraught if you spent four years preparing for a certain career only to find that the doors opening to you are a bit different than what you imagined. Don't get discouraged if your ideal job isn't in hot pursuit of you. That would be too easy and then you would have missed out on the experiences along the way.

We, as humans, innately have chips on our shoulders. We don't like the politics of the day. We don't agree with a philosophy. We don't think we got a fair shake with a class grade. But, we have fortune cookies in our hearts that rise above all this. Our soul reaches out with many messages,

but we have to tap the chips off our shoulders, break the cookie, and unravel the messages. We have to be open to accept the messages. We need to search for truth. I know we have good days and bad. Despite this, wake up every morning and say 'I'm ready' even though you're not, even though you're tired, even though...Because by doing this, the most difficult part will be behind you. Now, get out there, knowing that the rest of the world is flatter than Mansfield. Defend your room from the architectural plans and make the bankers happy! Congratulations to all of you.