



Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy
Commencement Address
College of Business Administration, College of Engineering & Computer Science,
College of Optics & Photonics
University of Central Florida
CFE Arena
December 14, 2018

Hello, UCF. Good morning, Knight Nation.

President Whittaker; trustees, faculty and staff; family and friends; and—most importantly—members of the graduating class of 2018: I'm so happy and honored to be here to help celebrate your special day.

Whether you are an undergraduate or graduate student, congratulations to all of you who are about to receive your diploma.

This diploma is more than a certification that you completed your coursework.

It's a testament to your intelligence and work ethic.

It's a reflection of the energy and effort you poured into your education.

A UCF diploma isn't given to you. Like anything that truly matters, it has to be earned, day in and day out. Each of you has earned it. And no one can take this achievement away from you.

To the families of today's graduates, especially the parents and other caregivers, this is your day too. I know your vision may be blurred by tears of pride, so I hope you can still see me. Please know that I can see you. I see the love you gave, and the sacrifices you made. The children you brought into this world—the children you raised—have become remarkable young men and women. They have come so far, and they couldn't have done it without you.

My mission, which I have chosen to accept, is to offer you a few words of wisdom as you prepare for the next leg of your journey through life.

While this is not mission impossible, it is a daunting responsibility. Fortunately, it's one I have some experience with.

In fact, this is the third speech I have delivered to incoming or outgoing college students this year. The first was down the road at Rollins College, where I was an instructor at the business school

before my election to Congress. The second was at my alma mater, William & Mary. That one was interesting because a member of my staff lost the only copy of my speech just minutes before I was scheduled to deliver it. Don't worry, everything turned out fine. For the speech, I mean. Not for the staffer. May he rest in peace.

For my remarks this morning, I have one goal and two self-imposed rules.

My goal is that, years from now, one of the students graduating today will face a challenge; that they will recall the advice given to them by the Asian-American congresswoman with the Irish name; and that my wise words will help them surmount the challenge.

I realize it's a lofty aspiration, but it's important to aim high.

As for the self-imposed rules, the first was captured by the Roman poet Horace, who wrote: "Whatever advice you give, be brief."

The second is to dispel the conceit inherent in any speech where older people offer counsel to younger people. The conceit is that the speaker has discovered, and will now reveal, the secret to living a rich and rewarding life.

The reality is, life is not some difficult but ultimately solvable problem, like completing a geometry proof or cracking a line of computer code, which I suspect many of you can do in your sleep.

Nor can life be hacked. There is no shortcut to personal happiness and professional fulfillment, no matter how clever or elegant the attempted hack might be.

Instead, life is a journey to be experienced, at times endured, and hopefully enjoyed.

With your indulgence, I'd like to tell you a little bit about my journey, and a few lessons I've learned along the way. I don't profess to have it all figured out, but I do hope these lessons will be helpful to you.

I was born in Vietnam several years after the Vietnam War ended. A communist government had taken power in the country. And it sought to punish those citizens, like my parents, who had worked with American or South Vietnamese forces during the war.

When I was a baby, and my brother was eight, my dad and mom decided things had to change. They wanted us to be safe, to have freedom and dignity, and to have a fair shot at a better future—and they didn't think any of this was possible in Vietnam.

So one night we fled Vietnam by boat, alongside several other families, my father at the helm. My parents knew we might not survive the passage. But they had resolved that it was better for our family to die together in search of light than to live in darkness. Even now, I can't imagine the courage this took.

Several days into the voyage, our boat ran out of fuel and we were dangerously adrift. I don't know if it was grace or good fortune, but a U.S. Navy ship patrolling in the area received our distress signal. The sailors onboard showed compassion for desperate strangers, giving us the fuel and supplies we needed to reach a Malaysian refugee camp.

Simply put, they saved our lives. Although I was too young to understand it at the time, this encounter was my introduction to America's uniquely wonderful combination of power and generosity.

Several months later, my family again became the beneficiary of this mighty nation's kindness, after President Carter made the politically-risky decision to increase the number of refugees that the United States would accept from Southeast Asia. That set the stage for a Lutheran Church in Virginia to sponsor my family's passage to the U.S., and we soon became proud citizens.

Although my parents were so grateful to be living here, their life was hard. My dad used to say that he arrived in America with nothing but his two bare hands, and this wasn't just a figure of speech. My parents struggled and sacrificed so their children could succeed. Whatever I have managed to accomplish in life—whatever I have amounted to—can ultimately be traced back to them.

Now, as you sit here, listening to me talk about my journey, you may be thinking about your own journey. About the road you have traveled, and the obstacles you have already overcome. About the road that lies ahead, and the challenges you will inevitably confront.

At big moments like this, it's only natural to look both backward and forward.

When you look back, I hope you feel a sense of pride that your hard work is paying off. I hope you also feel a sense of gratitude for the people in your life who have helped you—just as my parents and those American sailors helped me. I hope you feel a sense of humility, rooted in your appreciation that you didn't get here on your own.

The support you received may not have been as vivid as a father leading his family on a dangerous voyage from darkness to light, or as dramatic as U.S. servicemembers using their power to rescue strangers whose names they would never know and probably couldn't pronounce anyways.

The sacrifices made by those who love you may have taken a simpler, perhaps less stirring, but still significant form. It's the quiet dignity of your parents who wake up every day, go to work, and put aside their earnings so you can attend a school like UCF. It's the family member or friend who always takes your phone call and never sends you to voicemail—the one who stays up late talking to you when you're nervous about a big test or upset over a bad breakup. It's the tough but caring teacher who saw your potential when nobody else did, and then helped you reach it.

So I hope you'll take a moment today to reflect upon the people in your life who have sacrificed for you. If you can, tell them how much they mean to you. If that's not possible, please keep a special place for them in your heart.

Today is also a day to look forward and to prepare for the challenges on the horizon.

Life isn't easy. And it isn't always fair. I mean, how is it fair that UCF went undefeated for two seasons in a row, and still didn't make the college football playoffs?

Sorry, I just had to get that off my chest. I'll get back to my point.

When you face adversity in life, you'll need to put on your armor and prepare for battle, like the Knights that you are.

Your weapons in this fight will be the same ones you have wielded up to this point. Your inner strength and your external support system. Your fortitude and your family and friends. Your backbone and the people who always have your back.

I have two gentle pieces of advice for you.

First, find your sense of purpose. That's the thing, or combination of things, that causes you to "charge on."

Your fuel can be your family. Or your faith. It can be your desire to pay it forward, helping others as a way to honor those who helped you. I probably shouldn't say this, but it can even be your desire to prove wrong the people who underestimated you and said you weren't good enough. Because, let's face it, haters gonna hate.

Looking back on my own life now, it's clear that many of the choices I made—from working for the Department of Defense after 9/11, to running for Congress—have been part of an effort to chisel away at the debt of gratitude I owe my beloved father and my beloved country. To live a life worthy of their sacrifice. Whenever I go through tough times, it helps me to remember who, and what, I'm fighting for. I urge you to find your fuel, and use it to power you forward.

My final piece of advice, when you face personal or professional hardship, is to draw strength from your character and from your community.

Your character has been shaped by your experiences, including your time here at UCF. It's your core values and principles. It's the code you try to live by, even if you sometimes fall short, as we all do. It's what you do when nobody is watching.

At its best, character is grace and grit. Kindness and compassion. A sense of humility, a sense of humor, and a sense of justice. A deep appreciation for life, and how precious it is, but also how fragile. The capacity for hard work. A sense of patriotism, but not one that blinds you to the common humanity we share with citizens of other nations. The courage to try, and the courage to fail. The willingness to fall down, again and again, and the willpower to get up every time.

When you confront external challenges, you'll find strength in these internal qualities.

You should also derive support from your community. Each of us belongs to many overlapping communities. Some small, others large. Some intimate, others more impersonal. Some you choose, others that choose you. Your family, your friend group, your team, your school, your neighborhood, your town, your country, our world.

It sounds simplistic, but try to make every community you are part of better, not worse.

Do this because, as my own life has taught me, serving others is the single best way to find personal fulfillment. But also do it because, if you don't support and sacrifice for others, you can't expect them to support and sacrifice for you when you need it most.

In life, your best defense against darkness, doubt, and despair will be your sense of purpose, your character, and your community. They will give you the strength to charge on.

Congratulations again. You've done an amazing job. Good luck in the future. I'll know you'll keep making us proud.