



Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy
Commencement Address
Hamilton Holt School
Rollins College
Warden Arena, Alford Sports Center
Winter Park, FL
May 12, 2018

President and Mrs. Cornwell; Dean Brown; members of the Board of Trustees; faculty and staff; family and friends; and—most importantly—members of the Rollins College Hamilton Holt graduating class of 2018: it is an honor to be here with you on this most special of occasions.

To re-introduce myself, my name is Stephanie Murphy.

Since January 2017, I have represented Seminole County and part of Orange County in the United States House of Representatives, one of our nation's least popular institutions.

Please, please: hold your applause.

Before my election to Congress, I was an instructor in the Rollins College Department of Business, and taught several cross-listed evening classes in the Holt School.

According to one student review of my teaching performance, enshrined for eternity on ratemyprofessors.com: "She takes off points for not attending class. She's nice and smart though, and tries to help the student understand how finance works. Make sure you stay up on the reading because she gives pop quizzes the next day for credit."

According to another student review: "Stephanie always came to class in extremely cute outfits which was fun! Also, it was [baller] that she always rolled in texting on two iPhones at once. I want to be that boss one day. She actually managed to teach me Excel, which is a daunting task for anyone, since I have the attention span of a barbecue rib when it comes to anything math-based."

High praise indeed. If this were a concert, I would drop the mic and strut off the stage at this point.

In all seriousness, it is wonderful to be back on campus. And it is even more wonderful to be invited to speak to this outstanding group of graduates, nearly 300 strong.

For you, today represents the culmination of one journey and the commencement of a new journey.

Let me begin with a simple expression of admiration. I have read some of your biographies and backgrounds, and I stand in awe of what you have accomplished, both as individuals and collectively as a class.

Your ages range from 21 to 67. Very few of you followed a conventional or linear path. Most of you have full-time jobs, attending class at nights or on weekends, giving up precious time with loved ones. Many of you are about to become the first person in your family to graduate from college, having navigated financial aid registration without guidance. Some of you are parents, striving to balance family, work, and school—and some days it felt less like balance than just hanging on.

You have had long nights finishing homework after long days of work and caring for loved ones. You have figured out how to schedule group work with others just as busy as you. You have raced from work, cursing I-4 traffic and Rollins parking to slide into class late, hoping the instructor didn't see you.

But I want you to know I saw you—and I see you today.

I know you have confronted, and conquered, great challenges.

You faced hardship, and fought hard to surmount it.

You stumbled or were knocked down at earlier points in your life. But, rather than conceding defeat, you got back up, dusted yourself off, and kept going.

You defied expectations, demolished stereotypes, and silenced skeptics.

You refused to make excuses. You rose above difficult personal circumstances and social conditions.

You understand the hard truth that the world owes you nothing. You *earned* what you have, including this terrific Rollins education.

You may have thought about giving up along the way, but you never did.

As a result, today you will receive your richly-deserved reward. It is a reward that nobody can ever take away from you.

The American author James Salter wrote in his memoir that he liked men and women who have known the best and the worst, whose lives have been anything but a smooth trip, who have been battered by storms.

I confess that I do too. In part, this is because I personally empathize with your struggle to overcome adversity. In your journeys, I see my family's journey. In your stories, I can trace the narrative arc of my own story.

Let me warn you. We have arrived at the point in the speech where I will talk about myself. Asking a Member of Congress not to talk about themselves is a little like asking us to hold our breath for two minutes. There is a very real chance we could pass out and possibly perish.

Don't let my Irish last name—Murphy—confuse you. My maiden name is Dang, and I am an immigrant and a refugee from Vietnam. In the late 1970s, the Vietnam War ended and a communist government took power.

My brother was eight years old at the time, and I was a baby. My parents worried about our futures. They didn't want their children to grow up under an oppressive government that did not respect human rights. They wanted us to live in a place where we would be safe, where we would have freedom and dignity, and where we would have the opportunity for a better life—and they didn't think any of that was possible in Vietnam.

And so we left Vietnam in a small boat in the dead of night along with several other families. But our boat ran out of fuel in the middle of the South China Sea. We were simply drifting, and I'm sure some adults on the boat thought the end might be near.

Fate, however, had a different plan for us. Thanks to grace or good fortune, a U.S. Navy ship patrolling in the area happened to find our boat. The sailors onboard, showing compassion for desperate strangers, gave us the fuel and food we needed to reach a Malaysian refugee camp.

This was my introduction to America's uniquely wonderful combination of power and generosity. It was also the moment that made the rest of my life possible.

After several months at the refugee camp, a Lutheran Church sponsored my family's passage to the United States, where we settled in Virginia and became proud American citizens.

Although my parents, my brother, and I were eternally grateful to be living in this country, our life here was far from easy, especially for my parents. My father used to say that he arrived in America with nothing but his two bare hands. We had very little money and my parents didn't speak English. They worked long hours at physically-demanding jobs, day and night, in order to make ends meet and to provide a better life for my brother and me.

Because of my parents' selfless sacrifice, along with a work ethic I inherited from them, I was able to attend a good college and graduate school, to get gratifying jobs in the private sector, to work for the Department of Defense after 9/11, to teach here at Rollins, and to become the first Vietnamese-American woman to serve in Congress.

At every stage of my life, and especially when I ran for elected office, there were people who doubted me, perhaps because of my background, race, or gender—all things I could not control. I'm sure you know exactly how it feels to be underestimated like this. And I confess that, on occasion, the doubts expressed by others caused me to question my abilities, to lose confidence, and to feel insecure.

At the same time, at every stage of my life, there were family members and friends who loved me, who lifted me up when my spirits were down, who fought for me and fortified me, and who never—ever—let me quit. If I have amounted to anything, it is because of them. I know each of you has people in your life like this. I bet many of them are in the audience today, beaming with pride and trying their best not to cry.

Let me put it plainly. Our stories may differ in their specific details. But the broad outlines are the same. They are tales of tenacity, of journeys both physical and emotional, of taking the non-traditional path, of perseverance and persistence, of confronting challenges, of fighting ferociously, of working hard to better yourself.

Just as I see something of myself in each of you, I hope you see something of yourself in me.

Let me close by saying a few words to guide you as you complete this voyage and prepare to set sail again.

I do so with modesty, and there are two reasons for that.

For starters, I appreciate that it is far easier to dispense advice than to follow it.

In addition, I recognize that, for the most part, you are not graduates in your early 20s, leaving behind the comfortable confines of college and venturing out into the so-called real world for the first time. Most of you have inhabited the real world for some time now. You know that it can fill your heart with joy, but that it also has the potential to break your heart. You have no illusions about it. You see it with clear eyes and a steady gaze.

With those caveats, I offer this counsel.

Perhaps every generation has felt the same way, but there is something intensely unsettling about the current climate in our country and, indeed, around the world. It feels like we are living in a period of profound complexity, confusion, and change.

As a result, it is easy for even the most poised among us to feel a bit unmoored, like a small ship in stormy seas.

Amid such turbulence, it is only natural for you to seek out ways to help you maintain your equilibrium and to keep you on a true course toward your next destination.

My advice is this. As you confront these *external* challenges, look inward. Find stability and strength in your *internal* values and qualities.

The good news is that the values and qualities that will matter the most going forward are the very same character traits that you have *already* displayed in going back to college, successfully completing your coursework, and graduating today.

First: Have the courage to try. Have the courage to act. And, yes, have the courage to fail.

Be the proverbial man—or *woman*—in the arena that Teddy Roosevelt so admired. The one whose face is marred by dust, sweat, and blood. The one who strives valiantly, and who sometimes comes up short. The one who may win or lose, but whose place will never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Second: Be determined and diligent.

Recognize the possibility that others may have greater natural abilities or natural advantages than you. But commit yourself to the principle that, when it comes to pursuing the professional and personal goals you have set for yourself, nobody else will want it more than you and nobody else will work harder than you.

And finally: Choose to live a life of passion and purpose. Live a life of service, whatever form that service may take. Dedicate yourself to helping others.

Do this to honor those special people who helped you. And do it because, as my own life has taught me and as your own lives have likely taught you, serving others is the single best way to find personal happiness and fulfillment.

It was Dr. King who said that “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’” If you can answer that question to your own satisfaction, you are leading a good life in the most meaningful sense of the term.

If you have the courage to try; if you are determined and diligent; and if you dedicate yourself to serving others—you can navigate the roughest seas and weather any storm.

So, to you—the class of 2018—I congratulate you, I commend you, and I wish you the best. Keep making us proud, as I know you will.

Thank you.