

UGACPH Commencement

Dean Williams, graduates, family and friends of graduates,

It is a privilege for me to serve on the College of Public Health Advisory Board, and I am honored to be your commencement speaker. But, I am cognizant, very much so, that as a student and as a dean I have attended many commencements, and I have almost no remembrances of any comments made by the speakers. My thoughts as I prepared these comments was to honor the graduates, and those of you who helped make this day possible, and leave something important in the minds of the graduates, maybe even something they can remember in the years to come.

As important as you graduates are, each of you knows you did not get here alone. So reflect with me on those who helped make this day possible for you. Your family, friends, teachers and counselors, mentors whose names you know and the no-name angels in your life whose names and even presence were unknown. None of us is an island. We are shaped by those around us. So be thankful for those who have shaped you, and especially be thankful for the faculty and staff of the College of Public Health who have helped prepare you for a role in the noble mission of public health to promote health, protect from disease and injury, prepare and respond to emergencies whether natural or man-made, and prevent unnecessary deaths from any cause. The work is noble, the focus is on others, the rewards are in the doing, in the smiles of healthy children, and in improving the quality of life for all.

And the challenges are great. My generation has left you with 47 million Americans without basic health insurance, and in Georgia a public health status for our citizens, your neighbors and mine, that ranks in the lowest ten percent of the states. Almost whatever it is, we in Georgia need to improve. Our infant mortality rates are too high, our children, and too many of us, are obese or overweight, too many still smoke, and too many children are having children and setting parent and child up for failed lives. But, despite the problems it is still difficult to provide education about responsible sexual behaviors in our school systems. Some people seem to believe, if we don't talk about sex, it won't happen. Don't we wish that was true. We ignore that a 25 percent or more of the inmates in our jails were born to teen parents. And we continue to send broken bodies and brain injuries to hospitals by opposing seat belts in pickup trucks. I have characterized the opposition to mandating the use of seat belts in pickup trucks, and the wearing of helmets when riding all terrain vehicles and bicycles as a full employment act for emergency medical personnel, orthopedists, neurosurgeons, and morticians.

And I, of course, want you graduates to jump in and fix all this, and make Georgia one of the Nation's public health leaders. And I know I want too much, but I know as well you will help make things better whether you work in public agencies, non-profits, or in the private sector, but that is not all I ask, nor is any of what I have said before what I want you to remember. So, ALERT, the red light is flashing. Here is how I want you graduates to make an impact in your professional lives.

Be a leader and as a leader;

Be Ethical – Ethical issues are common in our work. Pay attention to them

Be Consistent – Your impact on others will multiply if they can rely on your being consistent.

Be Powerful – Not in physical strength, but in their strength of character, and their passion and commitment to their work. Some leaders are highly visible with their power, others less so, but they are still powerful.

Be Positive – Positive, can do people energize an organization. Be positive about your work and do not join the fellowship of the negative. Stay away from the naysayers, and if you are the boss you must either change them or get rid of them.

So, be a leader in life. Be an ethical, consistent, powerful, positive presence in your professional and, yes, in your personal life.

Do so and you will make me proud I spoke to you this day. You will make Dean Williams and the College's faculty and staff proud you spent time with them, and you will bring pride and joy to all who have supported you through the years.

But most of all, do it for you.

Thank you and best wishes.