

Chapel Talk
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“From My Heart”

When I was asked to give a talk, I thought, “What in the world could I talk about that would be of interest to the school community?” After a lot of thought, I realized that there were many topics I could choose from. Then the only thing I had to do was pick one. Man that was tough. I have had a lot of experiences in my life that could be of interest to you, but also a lot that could be pretty dull.

Let me start with a little warning. Part of my life and reality has become what are called “emotional swings”. So, if I start crying or laughing hysterically for what might seem to be odd reasons, just bear with me.

That being said, my experience with St. Andrew’s started 18 ½ years ago and I must say it has been quite a journey. Looking back I realize I had a connection from the start given that I had graduated from an independent conference school. It is one of your competitors, Friends School. It was the start of something in my life that will forever be present. It gave me the same values and self-assurance that you all are learning now. It offered opportunities and life experiences that will follow me for the rest of my life.

Without talking too much about how in my years at Friends we never lost a football game to St. Andrew’s (and it wasn’t your fault, Mr. Colburn – we were just that good) it was always fun traveling all the way from Alapocas to Middletown. Seemed like such a long ride, football, basketball, baseball – St. Andrew’s School was always a great competitor.

What I have learned and believed to be the most important part of my education, notwithstanding Math, English, History, Language, Science, was the social part of life, **your personality**. Regardless of how intellectual you are, in the end, it is what makes you the person you become. It molds you, whether you want it to or not. It is about your character, your self-confidence. It is about being a nice person.

After graduating high school I went to the University of Delaware, and man, did I ever have fun. One regret I have is not getting my degree. I do believe life would have been a lot less challenging in the real world had I completed it. What I decided was to start working, buy a home and get married.

I started out my career working as a union laborer. At the time it seemed to be a good start, I had full benefits, it was good pay, but boy, did I have to work hard. It was also at that point in my life that I realized how invaluable my education was. I was working along side of people of all different races, educational backgrounds; people that were simply from a different world than I had come from. My first long-term job was working for a company called The Stone and Webster Engineering Corporation. They were building a methanol plant in Delaware City. I had worked on smaller projects but all that work was with a mechanical contractor that more or less had taken me under their wing working on the Hercules Tower in Wilmington, the new Alfred I. duPont Hospital, General Motors, and so on. Shellady Mechanical, who by the way, did the original plumbing and heating in Founders Hall, gave me the confidence and knowledge I needed to carry me into and through being part of building an industrial plant, a job manned by hundreds of trades workers and as many as 250 laborers at a time. It was a new world, but I managed to stay on that particular job for 2 ½ years. In the construction world surviving a job of that magnitude for the duration was quite an accomplishment. Especially for a young laborer who had gone to a private school and attended college and pretty much just threw himself into this career choice.

I continued working in construction for a while longer, until my wife and I decided to start a family. I pursued employment of a more secure nature and yes, a little bit easier on the body. I took a job with W. L. Gore & Associates. Another world, yet again. Now I have paid vacation, worked inside and had to learn a whole new work ethic. Gore was a phenomenal company to work for, but it just wasn't me. I stayed for a year and then looked for another job. Construction was always my failsafe, so that is what I decided to go back to. Unfortunately, by now work was not as abundant for union workers as it was in the past. Also we were expecting our first child. So of course, I had to second guess my leaving a secure job for work not so secure. I was plugging along working for a

friend who had a small business when I heard that St. Andrew's was hiring in their maintenance department.

Megan was born August 14, 1986, and I began working at St. Andrew's School October 7, 1986. **Was it fate?** I am back at a private school, one that I had competed against. But still again it was different. I again found myself having to readjust to my workplace. This time it was different. *You went to a private school and you are working as a carpenter's helper?* I found myself asking how I could have gone to a private school and just be working as a carpenter's helper?

My first day, I found myself walking around with Davy Staats, who retired 3 years ago after 38 years, and being introduced to faculty and staff and seeing Ashton Richards, an alum, who was teaching here at the time. We talked about playing ball against one another and banging heads on the football field.

“It was on that first day that I realized that it wasn't **what I thought I should have become** but **rather who I had become.**” I had become a person who loved to talk and listen and share experiences with.

I felt completely comfortable and secure at St. Andrew's School. I developed friendships in maintenance and learned about the school from another angle. I have always felt worthy being a part of the community. St. Andrew's School gave me an appreciation of camaraderie that until then I had never experienced. I truly believe that what made this work for me was that the person who I had become was someone who was friendly, could laugh at myself, was loyal, but most of all, where I had come from. It wasn't long after I was working here that I began helping coach football. That was exciting!! I believe it was Mr. McLean's first year here and we were coaching the junior varsity football team. I helped for a few more years until our second child was born. I just couldn't continue coaching.

I am comfortable saying that I have seen St. Andrew's School go through some pretty exciting changes. A new boathouse, addition on North Hall, Pool, Moss Annex, that area where I spent my first day, is now the beautiful school store and counseling offices. It

was nothing more than just a dingy old basement. But I think being a part of what the school is going through now is probably the most exciting since I have been here.

OK, what else can be said about who I have become? I have gone through different career experiences. My family by now has grown to three spectacular children, Megan, Matthew, and Emily.

There comes a time in your life when you say “**this is it.**” I knew that St. Andrew’s School was where I wanted to be, that it was **up to me** to continue to grow in my career. But what I didn’t know was that my life was going to take yet another turn? I had been experiencing strange clumsiness. Now let me say this – I was getting used to it – I would stumble or even fall and just laugh it off as to just being a klutz. It got easier to laugh about but inside I was scared to death. My walking didn’t feel right. Tripping over nothing just wasn’t normal. At home I suddenly could not complete cutting my whole lawn. Something I loved doing. I had gotten to a point where I wasn’t sleeping at night. “I didn’t know what the **hell** was wrong.” I had gone to the doctor a couple of times just to be told I was OK. X-rays, blood work, the foot doctor – you’re fine Mr. Perry. But one thing was for sure, I wasn’t fine. The last visit was when I told my doctor that he must refer me to someone, I didn’t know who, but it had to be someone who could help. He did just that. He referred me to a neurologist. But, oh, wouldn’t you know that the earliest I could get an appointment was two months away.

Man, does that ever make you feel helpless. But I wouldn’t accept having to wait two months. I called my doctor back and insisted on them doing something to help. And they did. They made me an appointment to have a CAT scan done that following Monday so that when a cancellation came and I was called, I was ready to go. Ok, well, that was something. So I had the scan done on Monday, March 8th, 1999. On Wednesday, March 10th I was called on the radio to come to the shop. The Shop, by the way, for those of you who haven’t been here long enough to know, was a building that the maintenance crew worked out of that used to sit where the O’Brien Art Center sits. It was an oversized garage.

I was in a manhole by the gym when the radio call came through. I climbed awkwardly out of the manhole and walked cautiously back to the shop. I had a call from the doctor's office. I was told that I had an appointment the next day with a neurologist. I insisted that the doctor tell me what they had found. Of course, they told me they couldn't tell me. But I would not hang the phone up until they did. Not being absolutely conclusive, she told me it looked as though I had Multiple Sclerosis, better known as MS. I remember hanging up the phone, walking back to the Director's office, shutting the door and breaking down. Mrs. Abbott (Sandy, as most of you know her) was the only one in the office, so of course, I didn't hold back. My appointment was for the following day and I truly did not know what to expect. My wife and I went to the doctor's office. He put my x-rays up on the big screen, looked at them carefully, turned around to face us and very matter of factly, told me that it looked as though I had multiple sclerosis, but that other tests had to be done to confirm the diagnosis. Dr. Edelson has turned out to be, what I consider, the best doctor for me. He doesn't pull any punches and doesn't feel sorry for me. This is it, this is what you have to do, and this is how you need to do it. This is what you can expect and that is, you will never know what to expect. MS is a very complex disease that affects everyone differently. But I do remember telling Dr. Edelson that I think I am probably the luckiest person that has ever been diagnosed with MS. I had my family, my job, my friendships, three beautiful children, what else did I need?

I began wondering just how long had I had symptoms of this disease? It was a very difficult thing to do. But you know what, my main benchmark for at least being able to recognize symptoms was during the filming of "Dead Poets Society." Robin Williams had come to the shop to talk with the staff. I asked if it would be OK for me to get my handycam. "**Of course**" he said. I ran to my truck and got the camera. I began filming and was trembling. I thought I was just nervous. I now know differently. My legs were **trembling uncontrollably**. As I was filming Robin grabbed me by the shoulders, looked into my camera and said "**calm down, my son.**" Not knowing at the time that he had created a memory that gave me a starting point for what I now recognize as one of the many symptoms of MS. How many people, when asked, when they first start experiencing symptoms from MS, can say, "oh, mine is when Robin Williams grabbed me by my shoulders and did a little "shtick" about my spastic legs. What a great memory

to have on film and to have that memory because of where I worked. Here's another reason why I feel lucky.

There will be a time when I'm watching Duke play Maryland and will be able to tell whoever is watching the game with me, that Eric Boateng is not just a great basketball player, but he's such a great young man that I remember the morning that I was having trouble walking back to my car after a hard swim and he offered his help. These are the types of things that are so appreciated by anyone in need of assistance. You may think that they are just a kind gesture, and they are, but to someone that's struggling it's an act that has no words to describe. Thank you, Eric.

I look at life as a deck of cards. We are all dealt a hand. Some cards can be thrown in for new ones. Some can't. But no matter what the hand is that you are dealt, it is your choice to either play it or fold it. I have so many things to be proud of in my life. I intend on finishing my professional career with pride, success, and dignity.

Yes, I've gone from climbing 278 feet to the top of a vessel in Delaware City, **what a view**, to walking around the clock tower on Founders to change lights, **how insane is that?** Hanging the Christmas wreath at the peak of the pool facing Noxontown Road, **never having a fear of heights** enjoying a run in the afternoon, playing a little basketball at lunch to not being able to stand on one foot. To completely losing my equilibrium, to thinking of getting to the third floor of Founders as an Olympic event. Look at me sitting here giving this talk – another change – having MS. But this was of a more permanent nature. And you know what, all the experiences that I have had have given me memories that no one can take away. It truly has made me learn to do things carefully that before would not have entered my mind.

Do you think of stepping off a curb and just continuing into the middle of the street? Being in a crowd that you need to navigate to get around, not bumping into people? Not being able to stop on a dime, to walk and look back and to the side at the same time without losing your balance? One symptom that is tough to get used to is what I mentioned earlier **“emotional swings,”** for me it is fun, for some it is misunderstood.

My swing tends to be laughter, my Mom just last week asked me “Why in the world do I laugh at everything?” I try to explain “Would you rather me cry?”

God has blessed me with laughter, as Mr. McKelvey will warn, “**Uh oh --Russy’s getting ready to get a giggle on.**” It is a new way of living, but as I have done with everything in my life, I have made it fun. It works for me because of where I come from and where I have ended up.

I’m not so sure it was fate that brought me to St. Andrew’s School, but rather, that it was God’s plan for me from the very beginning. Some may say that the hand I was dealt seems unfair. I would **challenge** anyone to explain how having MS is unfair. “My world has been formed around me and is second to none.” I love my colleagues, my family, my close friends, but most of all, I love who I have become. To quote Dr. Dyer “What can I learn and how can I grow from what I am receiving?”

I chose to play the hand that I was dealt. What made this choice easier for me to make was again where I had come from and now, where I was. My world had come full circle. Yet again my career was being challenged. The difference this time was that I found that between my family and St. Andrew’s School that there was **nothing that could keep me from moving forward.** My children gave me the strength to go on, they made me laugh when I felt like crying. There is a lot of truth to the saying that “if you fall down you just have to get up, brush yourself off and move on.” My world has slowed down, however, a little old lady told me recently, “you sure are moving slowly but you are getting there.”

What I do know is that God blessed me with my 3 beautiful, loving, caring children that have unconditional love for their mother and me. Who laugh with me, cry with me and at times, laugh at me, because I am their DAD, because they know laughing heals so much. I know that God has blessed me back to a community like St. Andrew’s School much like my beginning at Friends School. God has blessed me by allowing me to have memories that no one can take away. I have had many failures in my life, however, they are no longer failures, but have become challenges, challenges that I will face and persevere with. The physical part of my life that was taken away from me was replaced ten times over. The way I look at the world, the way I see those that are less fortunate than me, the

lessons that I have learned from losing what I had become so used to having are invaluable.

It's about the foundation that was built in my life, that all of you are building now. That foundation is one that stands in the strongest winds, withstands any weight. Yea you may slide off at some point in your life, but it's still there and it will be up to you to get back on, **(it will be at that point when it's about choices.)** You guys are so very fortunate to be getting such priceless tools to build with. **"Make the right choices"** and always remember how powerful a smile is and that it does heal.