

## **HARFORD COMMUNITY COLLEGE 2005 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY ROGER RALPH, MAY 21, 2005\***

I feel honored and fortunate to be Harford Community College's 2005 Commencement speaker. Congratulations to all of you graduating this year but especially to those of you who attained your degree while also working; those of you who used this wonderful community institution to pursue a new career; and those of you who were single mom's raising your children and simultaneously studying to achieve today's important milestone in your own personal journey. I believe most of us- unless we've been there- do not truly appreciate how hard this was.

After President LaCalle asked me to be your Commencement speaker in my typical fashion I sought a lot of advice from colleagues about what they believed would be relevant to this group. After all, you are a challenging group for a Commencement speaker to face. Your median age is 27; many of you already have a lot of life and job experience; and the majority of you far clearer about your career direction than I was at your age. I would contend, however, that more often than not what one ends up loving to do professionally cannot be known to you now. Even for those of you who believe you are clear about the direction of your professional career will likely be surprised where your future job experiences- with its inevitable successes and failures- lands you in your forties or fifties. You may end up in a totally different arena than you've anticipated or remaining in the field you've studied in a totally different specialty- the emergency room nurse, for instance, who discovers she is far more talented as an administrator.

In this context, my own career should be both encouraging and comforting to you. I was a history major in college, thought I wanted to be a teacher, a psychologist, or a diplomat. I had never given business a thought. I was lousy with numbers, clueless about business, and rarely balanced my check book- not a good characteristic for a career in business. I did not get into business until the age of 38. And this was only because my mentor Jim Rouse, Columbia, Maryland's founder, out of the blue asked me to run the new town's Tenth Birthday Celebration where I unexpectedly caught a glimmer of some entrepreneurial talent. This experience combined with the results of a "What Do I Want To Do When I Grow Up" test taken subsequently and good counseling led me to quit my job and struggle- with my wife's support- to begin a business career when I was almost 40. Fortunately for me and our family after getting our loan request rejected by nearly every bank in Maryland we were able to obtain a bank loan guaranteed by the Small Business Administration after being unemployed for a year. I chuckle now, though I didn't at the time, that many of the bankers I approached told me "health clubs are a fad just like hula hoops. One, trying to set me straight said "Bel Air is suspect as your planned location for this thing. Heck, they still have a cow grazing next to the county's only shopping center. That was true. For years "Elsie" grazed where a Chili's now stands. Those of you who watched the Bel Air Athletic Club evolve since 1980 know that it became one of the largest health clubs in the United States and an industry model for family and community oriented clubs.

An aspect of most successful people's career not talked about much at Commencement is the normalcy of periodic fear. Let me reassure you that this is a routine part of the human condition for most of us. Rare is the human being who being required to do something in unfamiliar territory doesn't feel a bit like an imposter. Personally I always found this conversation between the chief executives at Coca-Cola and General Electric comforting. I think you will too:

Roberto Goizuetta, the very capable former CEO of Coca-Cola says to GE's CEO, Jack Welch:

"NOW GE AND COCA-COLA, WE'RE TRYING TO CHANGE EVERY DAY. THE KING OF COCA-COLA AND THE KING OF GE ARE TRYING TO CHANGE THE THING EVERY DAY BECAUSE IF WE DON'T CHANGE WE'RE GOING TO BE LEFT BEHIND"

Jack Welch responds to Roberto (talking about "change") saying:

"IT'S THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE WE HAVE. I'M ALWAYS SCARED. OKAY? IT'S TRUE AND ROBERTO I THINK YOU ARE TOO PROBABLY. I MEAN YOU'RE ALWAYS SCARED."

Perhaps one helpful "takeaway" from this address will be simply remembering that you will be in pretty experienced company whenever you find yourself job fearful as your own career develops. Odds are you'll be able to move beyond that as these two obviously have.

I want to return for a minute to my earlier reference about asking business colleagues for advice regarding what I should say from this podium today. I am only doing this because their perception of today's under 30 generation is so different than my own. They would be delighted that I share with you Sam Walton's take on his own success developing Wal-Mart.

"Somehow over the years folks have gotten the impression that Wal-Mart was something that I dreamed up out of the blue as a middle aged man and that it was just this great idea that turned into an overnight success-but our first Wal-Mart store was totally an outgrowth of everything we had been doing since 1945-another case of me being unable to leave well enough alone, another experiment- And like most overnight successes it was about twenty years in the making."

My own experience is that lasting success is almost always incremental in nature. While I share Walton's view in this regard I think my own generation does yours a disservice when they use- as they did with me- these words or phrases to describe their view of today's young adults: "feeling of entitlement"; "unrealistic job expectations"; "want their first job to pay \$70,000 plus a year for a nine to five day"; "don't want to

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work hard”. To say the least, this is understandably disconcerting to those of you holding down one or two jobs so you can earn your degree, those of you working two jobs so you can make ends meet, or worrying about how in the world you can find a job post degree that will pay enough so you can repay your student loans, buy a house, and put money away for your kids’ future. In this context I find it particularly ironic that this year’s 23 year old student speaker, Heather Westemeyer will tell you that one of her top ten lessons from the HCC experience is to “work hard and then work harder”. Good advice because the reality you will find is that it is tough out there.

Your world frankly is more complicated than when your parents were growing up. There are more job choices, there are greater demands on employees but less loyalty from employers, far more information accessible that employers believe you need to know, and the competition for jobs you really want will prove far greater in the global economy where we all now live. New York Times columnist and the author of “It’s a Flat World, After All”, Thomas Friedman says “Globalization has collapsed time and distance and raised the notion that someone anywhere on earth can do your job more cheaply...He goes on to say, “When I was growing up, my parents used to say to me” – my own parents did the same thing- “ Tom, finish your dinner-people in China are starving. But after sailing to the edges of the flat world for a year I am now telling my own daughters, “Girls finish your homework-people in China are starving for your jobs.”

As a 63 year old speaking at your Commencement today I share fully your 23 year old student speaker’s recommendation to you to “work hard and then even harder” if you want to succeed job wise. I would also add, it is critical that you work smarter as well. By this I mean you need to understand your true natural talents and be positioned to apply them expansively to each of your jobs.

If your experience is similar to most graduates, later on little will be recalled from the speeches given today. But even with that reality in mind I predict that if you can successfully address any of the four career challenges I’m about to tee up you will do extremely well at your jobs, be more passionate about them, and more successful over time.

## **CAREER CHALLENGE NUMBER ONE**

### **RISK TAKING PRUDENT RISKS**

If I did not have the courage to quit a good job at age 38 and take a risk clearly I would not be speaking at your Commencement this day. I have as much trouble as the next person- probably more- getting out of my comfort zones. Nevertheless, somehow at a particular time in my life I knew that if I were ever to jump off the diving board so to speak I needed to do it then. I both trusted my gut and screwed up enough courage to act. It helped immeasurably that my wife and pal Elaine was supportive. She didn’t have to be.

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If you ask older experienced people to look back on their life and cite their single biggest regret more often than not they'll say: "I wish I had taken more risks". Know it is far easier to take risks when you are young and do not have a spouse or children but it is never too late as those getting diplomas today over 50 will attest.

In 1999 a surprise hit was Baz Luhrmann's high school graduation speech CD which you may recall, "Wear Sunscreen". Most of his recommendations you already know- remember your friends, be nice to your parents, do something good for others- but he also urged listeners to "do one thing each day that scares you". I get his point but this is not what I am recommending- at least not career wise. I'd suggest that in fact the professional risks you end up taking should relate to your inherent talent and be something about which you can be passionate. And this brings me directly to your second career challenge which is figuring out your true combination of core talents early on.

## **CAREER CHALLENGE NUMBER TWO**

### **LEARN WHAT YOUR TRUE NATURAL TALENTS ARE AND OBTAIN JOBS WHERE YOU CAN APPLY THEM FULLY**

I would contend that in terms of job satisfaction discovering your natural talents and applying them is the most important thing you can do. I use the word "talent" here as defined by Marcus Buckingham. In his book, "Now Discover Your Strengths", Buckingham defines "talent" as any naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. Talents cannot be transformed. How you instinctively behave reflects your talent. Talents, according to Buckingham, have an "I can't help it" quality to them but also an "it feels good quality". "Skills determine if you can do something whereas talents reveal something more important, how well and often you do it." Your strengths are a result of adding knowledge and skill to your core talents.

Gallup has created a Strength Finders Profile developed from 25 years of research seeking to identify the characteristics of the most productive employees. In that process Buckingham and his Gallup colleagues have identified 34 dominant talent themes ranging from Achiever and Activator to Strategic and Woo which all of us share. They contend that your top five- your own signature themes- is where you should focus your energies. Parents, praise her A's in math and worry less about the C minuses in English. Administrators, worry less about his lack of organization and more about encouraging his creativity- it will be better for him and the organization long term. To get the flavor, here is Buckingham's descriptions of the four talent themes I've just referenced:

#### **ACHIEVER**

Constant need for achievement. Must achieve something tangible to feel good about yourself...Every day starts at zero. If a day passes without some form of achievement you will feel dissatisfied

## ACTIVATOR

Analysis has its uses but deep down you know only action is real. Only action can make things happen. You take action, you make decisions, you learn

## STRATEGIC

The Strategic theme allows you to cut through the clutter and find the best route. It is not a skill that can be taught. It is a distinct way of thinking, a special perspective... that allows you to see patterns where others simply see complexity. You cull and make selections until you arrive at the chosen path-your strategy.

## WOO

You enjoy the challenge of meeting new people. You are rarely at a loss for words. In your world there are no strangers only friends. You look for connections because you believe you know how to find common ground with people.

If you are interested in learning more about this for yourself purchase “Now Discover Your Strengths” and take the web based test on page 79. At a Delaware health club I recently conducted a seminar on the Buckingham material. Eleven of the twelve managers who did the profile said the five signature talent themes it identified “nailed them”. Shortly after taking the test one person came forward and said she realized she would be happier and more effective if she no longer managed the pool but focused on giving swim lessons. She did just that and is far happier and effective job wise.

A contemporary and a talented dear friend of mine who has been frustrated with his career recently took the profile as well. His signature talents included empathy, connectedness, individualization, and maximizer. For him, it confirmed what he had long suspected. Namely that he has a natural talent for managing, coaching, and team building type activities. Yet, he has spent most of his professional life working alone as a consultant. He regrets not accessing and taking advantage of the insights that Buckingham and other proponents of discovering and truly applying one’s core talents could have provided him. I hope, therefore, if you are at all uncertain about your unique combination of talents, a takeaway from this morning’s Address is that you work with an experienced counselor and learn them accurately.

Allow me to share with you a deeper story about someone locally who is using his talents well and in the process changing kids lives forever, Mark Heil. Here in Harford County a very important thing happened this past April. Nine youth ages 12 to 14 from the Boys and Girls Club of Harford County having previously won the Maryland State championship were sent to Atlanta to represent all of the Boys and Girls Clubs of the United States at the Lego World Robotics Championship. They competed against public and private school teams from 49 other states and 23 other countries. They finished

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number one in the competition, truly an extraordinary achievement. Their experience in this process that included six months of intense building, tinkering, succeeding, and failing- before going to Atlanta- will change some of their lives forever. For me the important question to answer is: “how did this come about”?

It came about because Mark Heil, the club’s IT manager, understood his core talent and was positioned to apply it. When I asked Mark what he viewed as his natural talent he responded in the following way:

“My talent is the ability to think at the level of kids- to put myself in their shoes. I have always been able to reach kids who are tough to reach.” Here’s how Mark got the Harford County Boys and Girls Clubs Lego World Champion robotics team started:

“I learned about the Lego company’s Robotics program and got support from my boss, Don Mathis, the Executive Director of our county’s Boys and Girls Clubs to order four sets. When they arrived I opened one and set it out on a table in the games room of the Aberdeen unit. I simply started working on it. I did not say a word but in a short time 35 kids were watching. After about thirty minutes I said, ‘If you’re interested in this lets go into the computer room and twenty kids followed me.’” As they say, the rest is history as they say. This is a classic example of somebody understanding their true natural talent, applying it perfectly and obtaining a result that in this case will change the lives of some of these kids directly. How many of us who like kids and relate well to them would have had the natural talent to understand that in this situation the absolutely best recruiting tool to employ was silence?

### **CAREER CHALLENGE NUMBER THREE**

#### **LEARN HOW TO INCREASE YOUR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

A Harvard Professor named Daniel Goleman has done a lot of research on what he has termed “emotional intelligence”. He concludes that emotional intelligence is twice as important as IQ and technical skills for job success at all levels -and I suspect life success too. The five components of emotional intelligence are:

##### **Self-awareness**

Do you have a deep understanding of your emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. Career wise, as we’ve just discussed, being aware of your talents is likely the most important piece of this component of emotional intelligence.

##### **Self-regulation**

Are you able to control your emotions and use them positively not negatively? At the extreme is the road rage warrior. More common are those of us who swear at the computer voice at the other end of a United Airlines automated response system asking

you once again for your confirmation number continuing to resist your plea and four letter expletives crying out for a human voice.

In his knowledgeable baseball book, “3 Nights in August” author Buzz Bissinger provides an apt description of someone whose high degree of emotional intelligence allows him to self-regulate his emotions.

The intense, successful, and widely admired St. Louis Cardinals manager Tony LaRussa learned to invoke what he calls his “twenty four hour gag order on myself”.

In 1996 the Cardinals had dropped an important game in late innings to the Atlanta Braves. Immediately after the game LaRussa “went off on Cardinals infielder John Mabry for chatting it up with Braves first baseman Fred McGriff after he got on base. LaRussa accused Mabry of not caring enough about the game. As soon as the words left his mouth LaRussa knew he had made a mistake- looking for someone to kick after a tough loss and finding the wrong target in Mabry who was a competitor. LaRussa apologized the next day but their relationship had been affected. Mabry began to mistrust his manager, his performance suffered.

LaRussa’s lasting lesson in this particular component of Emotional Intelligence was to establish for himself an automatic rule to keep his mouth shut for a full day in order to assess how much of his anger might be legitimate. “If he still felt agitated the twenty-four hour rule also gave him time to figure out something constructive to say.”

For myself, it took me a few years in business to realize that I almost always made bad decisions whenever I was impulsive or acting out of anxiousness rather than trusting my inclination for analysis.. How many of you know the circumstances under which you usually make good versus bad decisions? Does this knowledge actually impact your behavior?

**Relational Skills** – this is far more than “I like people”. In a job context it is friendliness with a purpose, an ability to find common ground with people of all kinds, a knack for building rapport.

**Empathy** – being able to put yourself in someone else’s shoes, listening and being open to hearing points of view contrary to your own.

### **Motivation**

Successful people are always highly motivated. It may not be apparent and their success may be motivated by different objectives, eg. fear of failure or the need to be number 1, but a high degree of motivation is inherently there. It’s not just the domain of “driven” people. I have a long time friend who as a person is one of the most successful I know. I suspect in large measure this is because his prime motivation employment wise was to have the type of job that allowed him plenty of time to pursue his interests outside of work. Climbing up the corporate ladder was never important to him. Traveling and

mentoring kids well. He was and he was motivated to make this happen throughout his life and did.

Effective leaders and managers in all fields will tell you there is strong correlation between “star” performance and demonstrating a high degree of emotional intelligence on the job. Much of Daniel Goleman’s work is too scientific for someone like me whose talent is not in that arena. The good news is this wonderful institution you are graduating from, Harford Community College, is well aware of the importance of Emotional Intelligence as a prime factor in building successful careers. Harford County based consultant, Norma Tilton, regularly does emotional intelligence training for HCC’s Continuing Education and Training Division and it is something about which I’d encourage you to inquire.

## **CHALLENGE NUMBER FOUR**

### **BECOME AN ALIGNED LEADER**

In our own community there are exceptional examples of strong leadership that are national models. Don Mathis, the Executive Director of the Harford County Boys and Girls Clubs is viewed as one of the top club executives in the country because of what his leadership has accomplished in our county. Tim Quinn who heads the county’s ARC has created a national model. Those of you who can remember how poorly our county’s hospital system was perceived by residents may not know the names of the leadership change agents, Lyle Sheldon CEO and Dr. Roger Schneider Chairman of the Upper Chesapeake Health System, but certainly recognize that in the last seven years there has been a sea change in how our local health system is used and viewed. This does not happen by accident but rather as the result of an underlying vision and values system that envisioned what the county needed and led the processes that made it happen.

The accomplishments of Cal Ripken, Jr., our county’s most favorite son, are well known to all of you. Like you I am in awe of his on field accomplishments. However, I’ve been fortunate to work with Cal outside of his on the field baseball career. What is so striking to me about Cal as a business leader is his innate understanding of the importance of applying his own vision and values to the growth of Ripken Baseball and the Cal Ripken, Sr. Foundation. He and his brother Bill, as a result, will build right here in Harford County the best youth baseball venue in the country and a complex that in time will become a regional if not a national destination with its minor league stadium, youth baseball and softball academies, Camden Yard youth sized replica field, Camden Warehouse modeled hotel, Ripken Museum, and innovative shopping complex.

Each of these people are far more effective and influential leaders because what they do organizationally flows from a clear set of articulated values that gets reflected not simply in the words associated with their vision but in their related actions and the actions of the organization.

Here is a little known but relevant illustration example of what I mean by aligned leadership. A few of you will recall that President Lyndon Johnson and Dr. Martin Luther King were political allies in the civil rights movement. In the mid sixties President Johnson was sending more and more troops to Vietnam but dissent was growing. President Johnson was getting criticized widely. Johnson knew that Dr. King was not a supporter of his position on Vietnam but the President asked him, in effect, to avoid speaking about the topic publicly. There was tremendous pressure on Dr. King to respond positively to the President's request particularly because of the importance of Johnson's support to the civil rights movement's progress. At the time I had just gotten out of the Army, was a graduate student at Columbia University, and in the audience at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967 when Dr. King from the pulpit acknowledged the President's request but said he could not comply. I recall the effect of his words was the public query of how could he possibly as someone who had spent his entire adult life fighting segregation of the body willingly allow segregation of his mind. Dr. King's relationship with the President was never the same. However, this is a lesson in leadership and courage that has stayed with me forever and Dr. King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech is one anyone concerned with issues of public policy, public morality, and our humanity as a people should read.

In an earlier era when I was a preteen in the late forties my hero was Jackie Robinson. When I became an adult Branch Rickey and Happy Chandler became additional heroes. Jackie Robinson was able to integrate major league baseball on April 15, 1947 only because Branch Rickey the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers was the sole person out of 16 club owners to vote for integrating the game and because the Commissioner of Baseball at the time, Happy Chandler was a leader who courageously aligned his personal views with his actions. Chandler, a Southerner and former Governor of Kentucky realized the absurdity and inherent unfairness of black Americans fighting overseas in World War II to save freedom in America but not allowed to play the country's national pastime in the major leagues back home.

You may think that this type of leadership is relevant and impactful only at the national level. I'd argue that not only is this not true but that the power of having a values system that both gets articulated and acted upon can be a very powerful change agent anywhere. Harford Community College is no exception as you'll see.

In preparing for this Commencement address I found a relevant response to a Questionnaire I had sent to county leaders in 2001. I was a speaker on leadership at the Harford County Leadership academy sponsored by this college and the Chamber of Commerce and had asked a dozen county leaders for their own definition of leadership and what they have learned as a leader. Here is one response:

"I have learned three vital lessons about leadership:

1. Creating a new order of things is perilous business

2. Progress is not possible without change and that's hard for most people to acknowledge
3. To talk about inclusion and diversity without bringing all people together is meaningless. Inclusion has to be for all.

As you may have guessed by now the responder whom I've just quoted is Harford Community College's former President, Claudia Chiesi. Because of Claudia and those who shared her vision HCC's enrollment is more diverse, its buildings more environmentally sensitive, its horizons more global, and its appreciation and celebration of the arts deeper. This would not have taken place without Dr. Chiesi's vision and leadership.

It is my belief that effective leaders possess a vision and values system which gives them the foundation to paint a picture of a better future and inspires them and others to take steps to actualize that picture. In this context Dr. Chiesi was a strong leader for the college and it is a better place as a result of her tenure.

At this point, many of you are asking yourself as you listen, "what does any of this have to do with me?" I'd say a lot. Think about it. Wouldn't our neighborhoods, our communities, our country and this connected world we all now live in be far better off if more of us apply our values, create a picture of a better future for what we care about, and spend our lives "painting" that picture?

The 2005 graduates of Harford Community College can do this in a job setting. You can use your careers as a base for leadership or you can be leaders in venues that have nothing to do with your careers but reflect your understanding of your talents, your application of an emotional intelligence which you've honed, and your willingness to take risks.

Let me close by wishing the college's new President Dr. James LaCalle well. I know Jim will use his exceptional relational skills and own very capable leadership talents to add another wonderful dimension to this institutions progress. Both he and HCC deserve your support.

## **CONGRATULATIONS AGAIN AND THANK YOU**

\*This is an extended version of the Commencement Address by Roger Ralph to the 2005 Graduates of Harford Community College. Roger Ralph and his wife Elaine developed, owned and operated the Bel Air Athletic Club in Harford County, Maryland from 1980-2000. Bel Air was recognized by the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclubs Association as one of the top five health clubs in the United States. Subsequent to the sale of the Bel Air Athletic Club worked with Cal Ripken, Jr. in helping grow Ripken Baseball and the Cal Ripken, Sr. Foundation. Currently Mr. Ralph finds himself "unretired" and building with a partner a large scale family health club in Wilmington, DE. He can be reached at Rogerralphllc@aol.com.

