

**Lee Fisher**  
**President and CEO of CEOs for Cities**



Lee Fisher is the President and CEO of CEOs for Cities, a global learning network of cross-sector, cross-generational urban leaders dedicated to building and sustaining the next generation of great American cities.

CEOs for Cities was founded in 2001 by then Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and Paul Grogan, President and CEO of the Boston Foundation. It is headquartered in Chicago, with offices in Washington, D.C. and Cleveland. Lee is also a Senior Fellow with the Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University.

Lee served as an Ohio State Representative; State Senator; Ohio Attorney General; President and CEO of the Center for Families and Children in Cleveland; and Ohio Lt. Governor. In his role as Lt. Governor, Lee also served as Director of the Ohio Department of Economic Development; Chair, Economic Growth Council; Chair, Ohio Third Frontier Commission; Chair, Clean Ohio Council; Chair, Governor's Council on Affordable Housing and Homelessness; and member of the Ohio Venture Capital Authority.

During the time Lee Fisher led Ohio's economic development efforts, Site Selection magazine awarded its top national economic development award, the Governor's Cup, to Ohio three consecutive times – in 2007, 2008, and 2009. Site Selection also recognized Ohio with the 2008 Competitiveness Award, recognizing the Ohio Department of Economic Development, under Lee's leadership, as the nation's top economic development agency.

Lee led the creation of Ohio's first-ever Strategic Plan for Economic Development. The plan is best known for Lee's idea, the Ohio Hubs of Innovation and Opportunity, designed to foster urban-based collaborations between businesses, colleges and universities and research institutions.

Lee is a 1973 graduate of Oberlin College and a 1976 graduate of Case Western Reserve University School of Law. He also has his Masters Degree in Nonprofit Organizations from Case Western Reserve University.

**Lee Fisher Commencement Address**  
**University of Toledo**  
**May 5, 2012**

What to Change the World? Start by Listening - Four Life Lessons

*President Jacobs; Provost McMillen; Chancellor Gold; distinguished members of the Faculty, Administration, Board of Trustees, and alumni; loving parents, spouses, family, and friends; and, most of all, today's distinguished, proud, and relieved graduates. It's a great honor to speak today and to receive an Honorary Degree from this great University.*

I don't remember a word that my college commencement speaker said.

So it's my goal today to say something short enough that you may listen to it, and memorable enough that you might even remember it.

I want to offer you 4 Life Lessons that spell "LIFE."

*Listen. Imagine. Fail. Exhale.*

- *L- Listen.*

My wife Peggy and I have been playing a game for the past 30 years. We regularly go out to dinner with different people, and we've been trying to find someone who will know more about us at the end of the evening than we will know about them. After 3 decades, we're still looking. Why?

Because people love to talk - about themselves, their lives, and what they believe. Nothing wrong with talking, but we spend too much of our lives trying to be understood.

Virtually every war, every conflict, every argument, every debate, and every divorce comes down to just one thing- not listening. Today, especially in our national politics, we talk past each other, deliberately ignoring points of agreement for fear of losing political points and advantage.

As someone who once sought to serve in the U.S. Senate, I now find myself embarrassed by the dysfunctional, hyper-partisan culture of the United States Congress. I'm more convinced than ever that we must stop waiting for Washington to solve our problems. Change in America will come from the bottom up, not from the top down.

I call it Change by Us. Or more appropriately today, Change by You. Want to Change the World? Start by Listening.

Steven Covey wrote a book called the "*7 Habits of Highly Effective People*", and the most important habit was this, "*seek first to understand, then to be understood.*"

Hey, it's frustrating to know all the answers but nobody asks you the questions; but get over it.

Try asking the questions, not giving the answers.

Winston Churchill said, "*Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.*" "

- *I-Imagine.*

My father-in-law, Mike Zone, was a prisoner of war in WWII. We often wondered how he survived when younger, stronger, smarter, and healthier men did not. He never spoke about his

time as a Nazi prisoner; but one day, my mother-in-law, Mary, pulled out of the closet a small black book that she had never shown her nine children. It was a diary Mike Zone kept as a prisoner of war.

Two things jumped out from the faded but still readable pages. The stories of the children he and Mary would someday raise, one of whom would become my wife, and pages of pasta recipes from a man who loved to eat pasta but couldn't cook it.

He could somehow see beyond the cruelty of the guards and beyond the barbed wire, and see something other men couldn't see. His own future. He could *taste* his own future.

We human beings are the only living things that have the ability to imagine our future. The future belongs to those who can see it and imagine possibilities that others cannot see.

The world is coming at us at lightning speed. Think about all the information generated in the world between the dawn of civilization up until the year 2003. Today, we generate the same amount of information between Monday and Wednesday. If Facebook was a country, it would be the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest country on earth. There will be more text messages sent around the world today, than there are people on the planet. And here's something your professors didn't tell you. 42% of those messages will be sent by one person- my daughter Jessica.

When our son Jason graduated from college a few years ago, we asked him what he wanted to do with his life. He said something I never would have thought to say to my parents, but he wasn't joking. Jason said, "*what I want to do hasn't been invented yet.*"

You've been prepared at the University of Toledo for jobs that don't yet exist...using technologies that haven't yet been invented...in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet. Our challenge, *your* challenge - is, as Wayne Gretzky, the great Hall of Fame hockey player once said, "*to always skate where the puck is going, not where it is.*"

- *F- Fail.*

A commencement speaker isn't supposed to tell you to fail, but I will. I've had the great privilege of serving in statewide public office, but to get there I also lost a few times along the way.

One day we all learn that it's only a matter of 18 inches between a pat on the back and a kick in the ass. In fact my father wrote me this note on one of my election night losses, "*Some people are rather superior; and others have plenty of class; but the one's who's worthwhile, is the one who can smile, when he gets a big kick in the ass.*"

I also thought if I said "*ass*" twice in this speech, you'd at least remember that.

You will fall and fail. You should fall and fail. But fall and fail up. As a State Representative, State Senator, Attorney General, and Lt. Governor, I had the rare opportunity to work with and learn from common people who did uncommon things. They fell far in their lives, but they fell up. They failed, but they failed up. These people taught me the meaning of the Native American saying, "*The soul would have no rainbow, if the eyes had no tears.*"

*Yvonne Pointer and John Walsh* whose children were brutally murdered and had the courage to turn their pain into the courage to lead a national movement to protect children and victims of crime; *Linda Kerns* who successfully fought her insurance company's arbitrary decision to deny her coverage for a rare therapy that would treat her cancer; and the employees of *Norwalk*

*Furniture* in Norwalk, Ohio who refused to give up when their company shut down, and worked to find buyers in their home town to buy the company and put the town back to work.

Ernest Hemingway wrote, *“The world breaks everyone, and afterward, many are strong in the broken places.”*

The world isn't run by the smartest and strongest people. It's run by the people who show up. It's run by the people who never stop trying. It's run by the people who, in the words of Steve Jobs, *“build bridges, tear down walls, and light fires.”*

It's never too late to be what you could have been, but too many people take no for an answer before they've even asked the question. Kris Kristofferson wrote, *“Freedom is another word for not being afraid to lose.”* So always ask yourself, what would I do if I weren't afraid?

In that note my Dad wrote to me on election night, he also reminded me of the words of Teddy Roosevelt who said, *“The credit belongs to those who are actually in the arena- their place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”*

- *E- Exhale.*

42 years and one day ago, I was a freshman at Oberlin College. It was May 4, 1970, on a warm spring day that I'll never forget. A few days earlier President Richard Nixon had expanded the Vietnam War by invading Cambodia, and anti-war college protests erupted throughout the country.

About 10 o'clock in the afternoon, the news hit us in the gut as we huddled around TVs and radios on our sheltered college campus. In just 12 seconds, the Ohio National Guard fired over 60 shots at student protesters at nearby Kent State University. 9 students were wounded, one of them paralyzed for life; and 4 students were killed.

*Allison Krause; Jeff Miller; Sandra Scheuer; Bill Schroder.* Bill Schroeder was an ROTC student watching the protest, shot in the back. Sandy Scheuer was walking to class.

Life is good; but life is short. The greatest lie you can tell someone is that there is plenty of time. As Anna Quindlen has said, *“give up on being perfect and start the hard work of becoming yourself.”*

I learned as Lt. Governor that “LG” didn't just mean “*Lt. Governor.*” And it doesn't just mean “*Life's Good.*” It also means “*Let Go.*”

Like Moses who reached 120 but failed to enter the Promised Land, we will run out of time before we run out of goals. Live each day like it's your last, and eventually you will be right.

Take the time to exhale- to breathe. John Lennon wrote, *“Life is what's happening when we're busy making other plans.”* Years later, LeaAnn Womack said it even better in a country song, *“I hope you never lose your sense of wonder; you get your fill to eat but always keep that hunger; promise me you'll give fate a fighting chance; and when you get the choice to sit it out or dance; I hope you dance.”*

So, look up from the rush of your daily lives, and

- *Talk less, Listen more.*
- *Imagine and create your own future.*
- *Fail often, fail up, light fires.*
- *My speech is over....Exhale*

Thank you.