

2019 Spring Commencement Speech

May 4, 2019 | Katie Holmes

Thank you, Class of 2019, for having me. Congratulations on all of your hard work; it's really nice to be back home in Toledo. It's a little bit strange talking to a bunch of people that probably already know parts of my life story. I didn't have time to look up all of you on Facebook beforehand, so you guys have the advantage. Even though I didn't go here, I do have secondhand experience, as I witnessed my older brother attend law school here. He lived at home, and I remember being 14 years old, watching my brother live on cans of pork and beans, staying up all hours of the night reading incredibly long books about Constitutional Law and tort reform. To give the University of Toledo College of Law some credit, he was a sleep-deprived mess, but he seemed to be very well-educated. At the time, I wondered if my 14-year old problems were really that important, but he always reassured me that they were. He always took the time to drive me around, give me brotherly advice and threaten to subpoena anyone who bullied me.

So in a way, I had a vicarious education into what school should teach you - the value of consistency, sticking to your commitments, and making time to take care of others. When I was in eighth grade, I went to Notre Dame, and my dad was the coach of our basketball team, Christ the King Raiders. And I remember that in the championship game, we were up against this team of girls that were all at least two inches taller than us. And he called us into a huddle and said, "I don't want any of you to be scared. And you'd better not play scared out there." Really, we were

more scared of him than anyone else. But we went out, and defeated those Amazonian girls by one basket. A few years later, I was getting ready to go out and host SNL as a 21-year-old, and I was really nervous and really scared, and my dad was there in New York before the show. And he came up to me and said, “Just have fun and be yourself; they’re lucky to have you.” And in that moment, I wasn’t scared.

When I was auditioning for my first acting job in LA, my mom came with me, and when we were there we met a lot of kids my age. Once, at a grocery store, I became surrounded by young actors who had lived in L.A. for years. They asked about my previous acting experience, and I didn’t have any. My mom kind of brusquely ushered me out of there and said, “Well, we’re not going back there.” And she said, Katie, don’t worry; you have nothing to be ashamed about. You are who you are and you’re from where you’re from - so go in, have fun, and be yourself. And I nailed that audition. Thanks, mom. So don’t be intimidated about that first job or internship or audition – and if you get it, I have some tips on what you’ll need when you’re first starting out.

If you’re moving out, make sure you have what you need to feel comfortable. When I first moved into an apartment in Wilmington, I got dishes and a good coffee cup, and then I felt better, because I knew I could start the day off right. I went out and found all the best bakeries in Wilmington so I knew where to go if I needed a pick-me-up.

Don’t use a fake ID to buy wine and then try to pay with a check. I’m aware that no one pays by check these days, but that’s just more reason not to do it, it’ll be extra confusing.

When you're in the middle of a natural disaster, pay close attention to directions. I remember seeing a hurricane warning on TV, and it said, buy water AND also fill your tub. So what I did was buy a huge pack of Poland Spring water bottles, and then later when I was pouring the water into the tub, I realized, this is probably not what they meant.

Even though my friends told me to stick my jeans in the freezer to clean them, it just made them stiff. So don't do that.

I used to sell a bunch of my clothes and then use the money I got from doing that to buy more clothing. I was losing a lot of money, but I was like, "I'm running a business! I'm saving so much money!" I'm not sure what the lesson here is, but just be aware of your finances.

If you don't have too many loans, and hopefully you don't, see if you can travel for at least a little while. Mark Twain said that traveling was fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness. We live in a country where we have so many options, and for so many people in the world, our worst days would almost be a dream come true for them. Try to continue your education for yourself on your own terms. So keep your passports updated. Now if only Barry's Bagels was a global chain.

It gets cold out there, so make sure you have a scraper for your car. If you don't have a scraper, you better hope you have a pointy elbow. You don't know what the weather's going to be like - and that's not a metaphor, that's just the truth.

But more than the essentials, i.e. a dish set and a windshield scraper, make sure you have someone who's going to be in your corner. Be grateful for the people who push you. I used to know this producer who always set me up on meetings and tried to get me to go to auditions. for parts I thought I had no chance of getting, and after a while her confidence started working on me and I was going to those daunting auditions by myself and for myself. If people believe in you, it makes you want to believe in yourself, and vice versa. People react to your confidence. I've been tricking folks into believing I'm other characters for years now, and I haven't gotten caught yet! Guys, it's all fake!

I worked on a play with a famously intense director who kept pushing the cast to rehearse our lines over and over and over until they didn't even sound like sentences anymore and we were just shouting angry syllables at each other. He was very demanding; often in acting, directors will say something like, "let's take a soft 15 minutes;" he would say, "let's take a hard 15 seconds. But, by the time we opened, the cast had totally grown as actors together, and we felt the hard work had all paid off. And then, when I directed my own movie, I used some of the same techniques as that director. I pushed myself and my actors just as hard, because I knew it would make us all better in the end. Because I am a kind person, I let them come in 15 minutes late with Starbucks sometimes. I know you guys would never do that; you all seem very punctual.

So do the best you can with what you have to work with. Because you have a lot to work with - more than you might know. You've all been through a lot, you've had your own wild and

precious lives, you've maybe been kicked around a little and learned how tough life can be. I think you probably all have very strong and even intimate relationships with your laptops at this point, but really nourish that friendship with your computer, because it can be your best friend in your early 20s. It will literally keep you warm at night.

You're all going to graduate and go your separate ways, but keep on supporting each other. People come back into your life. Kindness costs nothing.

For the young women in the audience, I want to encourage you to lift up, listen to, and trust one another. I would not have been able to direct the films I've directed without a chorus of talented, creative, and brilliant women to give me support, to workshop ideas with me, and to proofread my emails to make sure they don't sound angry. I like to just add a lot of exclamation points after the word "Hi." Do you guys do that? Women need each other now more than ever, to continue the fight over equal pay, mutual respect and the war against systemic abuse and mistreatment. I went on a trip last month and met women who had fled Afghanistan, who are now refugees in Greece. And we would spend all day with them and make clothes and art together and have dinner and have a dance party, and then one of them would tell you that she was forced to marry a man at the age of 13. So keep your eyes wide open. There are women half a world away who are going through the worst oppression you can imagine, and there are women two seats away from you who could probably use a listening ear as well. I've had the help I needed to write and produce these stories about mothers and daughters and the bond between them, and especially now, women supporting women could not be more important.

I've been so lucky in life to know people who have given me their wisdom, experience and advice while I was growing up. My family has welcomed me home every time and sent me back out into the world. My dad, the unflappable voice of reason, the championship-winning coach. My mom, who reminds me that there's no shame in being who I am, and that I can always come home. And my siblings - to whom I will always be the baby who has to wash the dishes and take out the trash.

So, when I moved from Toledo to North Carolina at age 18 to start working on Dawson's Creek, we were four unknown actors working for a network that had just begun. No one knew what was supposed to happen. Luckily, something did. The odds were totally stacked against me - but guess what; the odds are stacked against everybody. So if you're waiting for a sign, this is it. I'm going to be that basketball coach and that producer and that big brother to you all and tell you that you are the person who's going to go out there and make things happen for yourself. And that's a terrifying and amazing responsibility. You deserve joy - not in ten years, but now. So try to be equal parts tough and gentle with yourself. Take things one step at a time. Work hard when no-one is looking, and don't let anybody say you never called them back. Thank you.