

UT Commencement Speech

President Sharon Gaber, Dean Amanda Bryant-Friedrich, members of the administration, faculty, proud parents, and above all, graduates, the first thing I'd like to say is "Thank you". On this wonderful day, as we all gather together, to celebrate your academic success, I want to simply share a few life stories with you.

The first story I'd like to share with you is how I started this technology career. I was born and raised in Shanghai China. Growing up, I showed academic strength in math and science. When it was time to select college major, my mother who was head HR for the most prestigious engineering firm in Shanghai, asked that I stay away from science/engineering major but choose education instead. Her rationale was that it was a better fit for a girl, have time for family and children. So I went to Shanghai Normal University and became a college professor eventually. Years later, I got an opportunity to come to the states for graduate study and decided to come to University of Toledo. Now many people ask me how I ended up from Shanghai to Toledo. Well, a year prior to coming to UT, I visited a number of universities including UT, University of Alabama in Birmingham, Texas Tech, and San Jose State. I fell in love with UT in October, great campus, awesome people, squirrels everywhere. Of course nobody told me how cold it was going to be!!

I chose Education Technology as my major and decided to go for Information Systems as a minor during my doctoral study. The first class in IS I registered was called "Information Access and Retrieval" and it was taught by a professor named Masbah Ahmed. Shortly before that semester started, I got a call.

"Hi This is Dr. Mesbah Ahmed."

"ok"

"Is this Sun?" - well, my real first name starts with an "X" and has a number of "Q"s and "G"s in it. So he didn't try to pronounce it.

"yes?"

"I noticed you registered my class."

"yes?"

"I noticed you are an education major."

My heart sank. "Yes"

"Did you take the prerequisites xxxx?"

"no"

"Did you have any programming background?"

"no"

... silence.... I was waiting for him to tell me drop out of the registration.

Instead, he said "Well you must work VERY HARD!"
"OK"

So the first class, Dr. Ahmed started by coding examples "Sub this, Factorial that..." I just took notes fervently. After the class, I asked a friend of mine "So what exactly is a sub?" Half way through the class, I realized that I would sit in front of the computer working on PL/SQL for 5 hours without getting up once, and had to get up every 20 minutes when writing an essay. I knew I found my passion.

That started my tech career and rest was history. Through this journey, I was a UI developer, became a senior PL/SQL engineer, moved on lead decision support services, becoming head of data management for large brokerage firm. I worked at various industries including financial services, healthcare, logistics, software, hardware, and cloud companies. I have transformed and redefined myself many many times. Steve Jobs said on his commencement speech at Stanford "You can only connect dots looking back." All of these experiences make me who I am today, and prepares me to take on the next challenge. I met a college best friend a couple of years ago in Australia. After graduating from college, she went on joining China Eastern airline. That's the ONLY company she has worked at. Now she is the president of Oceana division for China Eastern. The reason I'm telling you this is that there are different paths to success. What we found was that even though our career choices couldn't be more different, we have one thing in common. While I explored and grew through different roles at different companies, she moved from function to function within the same company, but grew her career and impact from learning different sides of the businesses. We both took on roles that are very different from the last one. Neither of us would say no to opportunities even though we felt sick to the stomach.

Recently I went back to China for a visit with my dad, my brother, and their families. I heard a lot about the prevalence of mobile payment in China and really wanted to see it first hand. I brought home some deep sea fish oil for my dad. My step mother, who is close to 80 years of age, pulled up the Taobao app (by Alibaba) on her iPhone, scanned the bottle with the camera, and the app pulled up a list of items available for sell. She told me "Oh it's cheaper to buy it in China now!" Everything can be done through mobile and app. Paying utilities, riding a subway, even paying traffic ticket - a violation caught on the redlight cam is available to be paid as soon as you hit the next traffic light! Even a breakfast vendor on the street has a QR code for you to pay for a cup of soy milk via mobile payment for 20 cents. I wonder how the tech giants like Alibaba and Tencent were able to be so successful and what really propelled the success of these incredible tech entrepreneurs.

I remember an interview Jack Ma did on CNBC when Alibaba went public. He said his true hero is Forest Gump. He said he watched the movie many times especially when he was frustrated or encountered major challenges. He even watched it right before going on the show that very morning of IPO.

What he said reminded of my high school best friend Mei whom I considered as my hero, and an incident we experienced together.

This happened when I was a college student in Shanghai. We were buying dinner at a very crowded KFC. A man cut in front of us ordering his food and then spilled his drink. Mei immediately jumped in to help him clean up and salvage what was left. I asked her "Why did you help him? He was so rude and cut the line." Mei answered, "I don't let other people's behavior change the way I am."

Many years passed and this has always stuck with me. I told this story to my students on the day of their graduation. I said some of them might be assigned to schools where they would meet students who were not eager to learn. They might get discouraged and feel that those students were not worthy of their time and effort. I told them the reason I wanted them to hear this story was so they would always try to do what is right as a teacher and do not get deterred when students seemed to be disengaged. Years later, one of my students looked me up when she came to live in US - one who rarely said much to me during the 2 years I taught the class. She sent me an email thanking me for that story and told me how much it had impacted her perspective on life.

The moral of the story is this. Focus on the long term goal, follow a set of principles as guidance, surround yourself with those who have the integrity and know-how, and let the rest take care of itself.

Delivering a commencement speech is a great responsibility. I hope I have done justice to this great honor. As you step out into the next chapter of your life, I hope that you find your true passion. I ask that you take risks and never let fear of failure deter you away from opportunities. And most importantly, I hope you find your hero and follow that true North Star that will shine light on your path even in the darkest moment. Thank you, and congratulations again!