



Maine Maritime Academy Commencement
Dr. William J. Brennan
Castine, Maine
May 6, 2017

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to Maine Maritime Academy to help us celebrate the Class of 2017. Congratulations! You have worked hard to earn your degrees and all of us here today are proud of your accomplishments. I want to thank you for helping with my ongoing education as president and I want to join you in acknowledging and thanking those who have helped you reach this milestone in your lives: your parents, families, friends, teachers and professors, and others who have supported you along this journey. It is a great day for all of us.

Joining us on this memorable day is another proud individual who is celebrating a 10th MMA anniversary of sorts and who will honor us by being our commencement speaker, Senator Susan Collins. I will have more to say later in our program about her many accomplishments

When the Class of 2017 arrived on campus four short years ago, a time that now seems like a world away, you assembled here in the field house to participate in Convocation where we helped you realize that you've become part of a community. During your time here, we celebrated our 75th anniversary – a time for reflection on how far we have come as a maritime college and to consider our path forward in this ever-changing world. I know that each of you will have made life-long friendships; that you will stand with each other no matter what the future holds; and I am confident that you know that you are Mariners and will be forever.

This is a great day. We have shared many happy times together and I will have fond memories of the Class of 2017. And we have also faced many challenges, some of which brought us to tears. Last year, one member of our community, DJ Breunig, left us. He was a member of this class and would have graduated with his fellow Mariners. It is a bittersweet time for all of us who knew this humble and kind individual and that is why his cap, what the midshipmen refer to as the HP or simply their cover, was carried in the Commencement procession under the protection of his classmates and rests in the chair he would have occupied today. DJ is with us in spirit. His memory remains with us and he is in our hearts on this special occasion as he will be in the days ahead. He is also a reminder of the frailty of life and the need to live it to the fullest every day. We humans are at once so very strong and so very vulnerable. In his honor, I ask that we observe a moment of silence to remember him, his family and all of those he left behind.

Many of those who were gathered to welcome you to Maine Maritime Academy when you arrived are also with us today to congratulate you and to wish you well as you go out into the world: all of the people who work here, from the dining services staff to the faculty and coaches, the IT staff to the custodians, the waterfront staff to the administration, and many, many others including residents of the Town of Castine who were your neighbors and are now your friends.

We also have with us today alumni who have helped you along the way and will continue to do so as you network in your chosen careers. Yes, there are many of us here today who have contributed in one way or another to your success and this next step towards your future, but you are the ones who did the work. With the completion of your degree program, the future lies before you like a path of untrodden snow.

Up until today, as the president of a small college will do, I've worried about you and lost a little sleep over you, too. But today, I get to impart a bit of wisdom and tell you my hopes and dreams for you.

There are many unknowns in your future, so even though you have access to unlimited sources of information through newspapers, magazines, television, and the internet, my hope for you is that you will stay informed and continually learning. We enjoy an incredible freedom of speech and a freedom of the press that, while we might not always agree with what we see or hear, is a privilege we need to value and protect. It is what makes it possible for us to be informed about the issues that affect us – our community, our society, and our way of life. It is part of what makes it possible for us to judge the character and substance of those who represent us. There are many nations where this is not the case, and where the abuse of power occurs frequently. But, we are all very fortunate to live in a democracy where each of us has a say in the way we are governed.

It is my hope that you will rely on one another, and you will support each other. Those of you who began here as Midshipmen Under Guidance, affectionately referred to as MUGS, were told to follow the head in front of you. That was to help you realize that you were now part of something bigger than you and that to be part of an organization, a company, a ship, you have to contribute as one of many toward the success of the whole. Whether you were in the regiment or not, all of you in the Class of 2017 learned from me and your other teachers here that we are one community, we help each other and support one another.

It is also my hope for you, that from the education you received and the experiences you gained at Maine Maritime Academy, that you will use your capacity for critical thinking. That you will inform yourself in order to make your own decisions, and to take responsibility for your own actions. We are a civil and decent society. We listen before rushing to judgment, and we evaluate others not by their skin color, or ethnic background, or sexual preference, or religious beliefs, or political party. Remember to stop and consider all sides of an argument before casting your hard-won vote. We live in a democracy – a government by the people, for the people, and that means all of you.

As I spend my last few minutes with you, my students, let me share my greatest hope and dream for you as you prepare to take on the world: I want you to act, and not just think and talk. People who are truly committed to making a difference get off the bench and get into the game. No commentator or critic ever changed a thing; only those who act make a difference. Whether one's impact is great or small, whether it is advancing a positive or slowing a negative is beside the point. For one does not get in the game to make the world a better place in some abstract sense; one gets in the game to make the world a better place than it would otherwise be if you sat it out.

Think outside the box, analyze carefully all that you see and hear, and do not simply follow the crowd, but act; get involved; get into the game. You have come full circle and you have arrived where you began that day of Convocation four years ago. But now you may see for the first time anew what we have been helping you to do over those years: to become individuals, to become independent, to be successful here, and in your careers and hopefully in your lives.

You have heard me say this time and time again: I am proud of you. I am proud of what you have accomplished so far and I have great hopes that you will continue in the Maine Maritime Academy tradition which has been established over the past 75 years. The Mariners who came before you forged a path demonstrating the strengths and abilities of our graduates. Over the past several years, our stature as an academic institution has risen to new heights and we have become even more well-known throughout the nation and throughout the world for the quality of the education we provide and the hands-on, can-do characteristics of our graduates.

It is now up to you to continue that heritage. And, as you do so, I hope that you will honor those who came before you and lend a helping hand to those who come after you. It is part of our tradition – we are Mariners forever. You are the keepers of our heritage. You have made me proud, now go out into the world and make yourselves prouder than you are today – make the community proud – make us all proud of the Maine Maritime Academy.

Congratulations.