

Rep. Tom Tangretti
Commencement Remarks
St. Vincent College

Archabbot Nowicki, President Towey, Honored Guests, St. Vincent Faculty, Students, graduates and family and friends of graduates, thank you very much for this high honor to be your speaker on this commencement ceremony.

It is truly the highlight of my public career, which, as you have been told, will be ending soon.

I have given a great deal of thought about what knowledge or advice that I might be able to impart to you young folks who are just starting your careers from someone who is ending his.

There were so many thoughts that ran through my mind -- many fits and starts.

It was very difficult to gather my experiences into some intelligent message that would make sense and be helpful simultaneously.

The fact that the last commencement speaker is the Leader of the Free World is not lost me!

Who am I to follow the President of the United States -- a speaker who arrived here on Air Force One, in a motorcade with Secret Service and traveling with many staff and media?

People waited around the world to hear what words he would utter that day – his words could have meant the difference between war and peace; or misinterpreted, resulted in the U.S. or perhaps the world economy going into a tailspin.

What on earth could I say or do to top that act?

But upon reflection, I started to think about all the things that the President and I have in common: we're the same age, we both served in the military reserve; we both have two daughters; we both have beautiful wives.

Both of us have also been in public service a long time; and we're both lame ducks.

Granted, his job requires a little more knowledge of foreign affairs, but the again, what does he know about Hunker Borough?

Every night we are enlightened by all the media in the world about his activities that day.

In Harrisburg, by contrast, we are known for our daily effort to try and avoid the media at all costs.

And, when there's disaster with national consequences he's immediately on the scene surveying the damages and pledging the full efforts of the federal government.

In Harrisburg, we try to avert disaster's in the State Capitol every day.

There are many issues on which I find myself aligned with the President -- opposition to abortion, support for school choice and faith based initiatives, and in the defense of marriage -- much to the consternation of my Democratic colleagues from the southeastern part of the state.

But admittedly, this war, this preemptive war and it's justification -- how we got there and why we're still there -- is completely lost on me.

Sandy will tell you that I've read just about every book published on the matter over five years and had to stop for the sake of my own sanity.

Conspiracy theories abound and it seems that everyone who ever worked in the White House or covered the White House for some news organization in the last seven years has written a book.

But then something happened that changed my perspective.

About a month ago Sandy and I were at a ~~pro-life~~ dinner in Pittsburgh, whose main speaker was Gianna Jessen.

If you have not heard about this remarkable young lady, please allow me give you a few details.

She was almost aborted; her biological mother had a saline solution abortion, one in which a saline solution is inserted in the uterus for the purpose of ^{CAUSING ABORTION.} ~~killing the baby.~~

She was subjected to this solution for about 18 hours, during which all of her body was burned inside and out.

The purpose of a saline abortion is to have the mother deliver a dead baby, which is what happens in ⁹⁹ ~~98~~ percent of the cases.

This procedure, by the way, is a lawful and common abortion procedure.

But Miss Jessen, miraculously, was ^{delivered} ~~born~~ alive.

Moreover, the doctor who performed the abortion was no longer in the clinic when she was delivered.

Had he been, he would simply have had the baby set aside and left to die. - *So called live birth abortion.*

Instead, a nurse who was at the clinic called an ambulance and had the ^{HER} baby taken to the nearest hospital.

Gianna survived, but she had severe physical problems – cerebral palsy being the primary one. *BECAUSE OF LACK OF OXYGEN TO ~~THE~~ ^{HER} BRAIN.*

However, as she grew up, her faith and many years of painful therapy not only allowed her to learn how to walk – something she was never supposed to do – but also ^{able to} run a marathon. *later in life.*

As you can imagine, the emotional struggles she faced were also significant. She still struggles with many of these things, *by HER OWN ADMISSION*

But again, her faith, *AS A RESULT OF FINALLY* and the fact that she was placed in a foster home with Miss Penny, who raised her as her own and gave her *COURAGE AND* additional strength, *which GAVE* Gianna to *the* recover both physically and emotionally *AND SPIRITUALLY* to the extent that since *the* age 14, she has been speaking and singing about her experience of what it is like to be a “child of abortion.”

But her message is not what you would think. Through her powerful words and her angelic voice, she delivers a message of hope and love.

In fact, she refers to her cerebral palsy as her gift. I wonder if I, or any of you, could view something that causes so much pain and physical ^{and emotional challenges} deformity as a gift.

I refer to this remarkable young lady and her life beginnings not because of how she came to be the main speaker at a pro-life dinner, ~~Ne~~ attended, but rather because of what she had to say at that dinner – specifically about President Bush.

SHE RECEIVED A CALL AFTER SHORTLY AFTER 9-11 FROM THE WHITE HOUSE TO ATTEND A BILL SIGNING CEREMONY, IN PA - THE BILL OUTLAWED LIVE BIRTH ABORTIONS.
 She recounted how she met the President in ~~2001, shortly after 9-11,~~
 AT THAT CEREMONY.
 at a bill-signing ceremony outlawing live birth abortions.

Her description of that encounter with President Bush was truly amazing to hear.

She said that as he came down the aisle on his way to the stage, he walked up to her and hugged her and thanked her for coming.

He congratulated her on her life and her strength.

She says she was so overcome with emotion that she was speechless.

The President ended their brief encounter with by saying: “God Bless you Gianna.”

Finally, she found her voice and told the President that she would pray for him. “That’s the best thing anyone can do for me,” he replied.

Here is the real message that I received that night, listening to Gianna talk about President Bush: We can certainly disagree about issues, issues as divisive as the war, but we need not hate.

The fact that someone would believe so sincerely in a cause that, despite the opposition, the criticism and the persecution directed toward him, he is willing to fight on in defense of that belief -- that says something about the character of the man.

I have to tell you – that was a sort of epiphany for me. That President Bush, no matter how anyone feels about the war, or the economy, or tax cuts or minimum wage or children’s health care, is a man who is true to his own beliefs.

He knows how unpopular he is; he knows his legacy may not be what he once wished, but he believes so strongly in his efforts that he’s willing to be hated anyway.

Don’t get me wrong.

I still disagree with the President on several issues, including the war, but that young woman gave me a newfound respect for him. I believe he is a man of principle and courage who will take on all attacks in

defense of what he believes is right, and I believe he is worth of our respect.

I now find it almost funny how that brief period of time listening to Gianna talk about President Bush had more influence on how I felt about the man, and his decisions, than the hundreds of hours I spent reading all those books.

Ladies and gentleman who are graduating today, I don't know any you personally but my guess is that all of you will have their character and integrity tested, just as the President has, on numerous occasions.

As you go forward in your lives and careers you are going to have the opportunity to either remain a person of conviction and courage by holding dear to your beliefs and fighting for them, or to give in to the temptations of expediency and convenience and do what others want, or what you think that they expect.

As many of you may have guessed, I have a strong and abiding faith in God and in my Church.

I believe with all of my heart that I, we, all of us, need that spiritual uplift everyday to help us avoid the pitfalls of daily life.

Lately, in my profession, that uplift I get from my belief and my faith has been very helpful.

As all of you know, I'm sure, the General Assembly is going through some very difficult times right now, and I'm afraid the worst may be yet to come.

People who I worked with everyday may have taken inappropriate liberties with tax dollars – action that could prove to be illegal.

And those people may end up paying a heavy price personally if that is true.

But even more troubling is what their actions have done to the entire legislature, which has been painted with the same broad brush. Regrettably, I think it will take a very long time for this historic institution to recover from the past few years.

Beginning with a self-serving pay raise, to a misuse of bonus payments, to questionable employment of relatives, the architects of these acts have embarrassed all of us in state government.

One has to ask oneself why, at some level, individually or collectively, these folks did not ask themselves what the consequences of their actions might be?

Unfortunately, I think the answer may be very simple: Because they were not practiced in the art of integrity.

Had they thought everyone was looking, or would look eventually, at what they were doing, they probably would not have done these things.

It's a great lesson in character and the consequences of being without it.

And, it's an even better argument for maintaining your integrity, which I believe basically comes down to this: DO WHAT YOU KNOW IS RIGHT WHEN EVERYONE IS WATCHING, AND EVEN WHEN NO ONE IS WATCHING!

I love the Pennsylvania House of Representatives – the beauty of its architecture, its incredible history and the wonderful chaos that sometimes is unintelligible and unexplainable.

Bismark's famous quote about two things you never want to be seen being made are laws and sausage is particularly true on session days.

Arriving at the Capitol some 19 years ago, I was overwhelmed with the sense of history and that I was walking in the footsteps of such famous Pennsylvanians as Benjamin Franklin.

And so I was appalled when on my first days in session I saw a less than idyllic scenario of debate and discord.

To an outsider, proceedings in the House must sometimes look like a Chinese fire drill: people at the microphone speaking with only a few people listening; some members on the phone or huddled in conversations at strategic locations around the chamber.

At the very least, a session looks impolite – at worst, an out-of-control process. But after 19 years, I see a kind of beauty to the process – and I know that it often results in real progress.

That's because when the really important things happen, you can be sure that everyone is paying attention to what is being said.

And, just as importantly, paying attention to who is saying it.

Because it doesn't take ^{long} to get to know which members of the House are believable -- whose words are sincere and spoken from the heart, regardless of the issue – and whose are not.

What is it that gives these particular members such command, and that demands such attention from other members?

Beyond the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, why is it that you trust anyone more than another – a professor, a CEO, a coach or a friend?

Not because you agree with what they are saying – at least not always.

Not because you know them personally – sometimes there are people that we instinctively trust and believe the first time we meet them.

Why?

What gives you that instinctive confidence about these people that you do not have for others?

I think that in many cases these people give off such a strong first impression of integrity that the ability to see good and character that God has given us immediately picks that up.

And believe me, that is an incredible power that has been given to us...and to the people we respect.

We have the spirit and the intellect to know who to follow in this life – even in cases where we have to base that judgment – take that leap of faith – based on what someone else has told us.

I can tell you that in my case, the realization of this was an epiphany, something that was very liberating for me.

I realized that I did not have to be so jaded as to be cynical about everything and everyone.

I have the ability to know whom is honest and just – and who to trust – if only I put my trust in God and the innate ability to see good from evil, honesty from dishonesty, character and integrity from the lack of those things.

Gianna Jessen’s brief witness to President Bush’s character gave me more faith and trust in the President – and in turn – our government than I have had in a very long time.

And it’s not because of my belief in his course of foreign policy or any of his other policies for that matter.

It is because that I know that someone with the faith, hope and love of Miss Jessen respects the President, and trusts the President.

I know that the President – the man who currently fills that office – deserves my respect, as well.

What does this mean to you?

What do I want all of you to take away from my admittedly simplistic and perhaps indecipherable attempt to explain to you something very important that I have experienced?

I’m not sure.

To be honest, I suspect that many of you may leave here today not remembering anything I have said, or worse, leave here remembering only that some nameless politician from the state legislature gave your commencement address, and that it must be true what they say about politicians – they all have their heads where the sun don't shine.

I truly hope not, because while I may not be the best person to deliver the message, I do sincerely believe that a small and simple truth that has been delivered to me is important enough for me to try to deliver to others.

And that truth is this: personal character and dignity are important, and deserve to be respected and, more importantly, duplicated by all of us.

The chain of events that began 30 years ago in an abortion clinic in Los Angeles and led to me speaking to you here today ^{were not ~~chance~~ ~~sub~~ ~~randomly~~} are not chance – I do not believe it.

I believe with all my heart that there is a purpose when so many incredible things come together in such a chain of events – a miraculous birth that should not have happened; an abortion doctor who wasn't there to prevent a courageous and righteous nurse from doing the right thing; a young woman who had every ^{right} ~~rate~~ to give up and hate, but instead, kept fighting, and not only loved but continues to spread that love; a woman like Miss Penny who lovingly raised

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Gianna and 56 other foster children as her own; Gianna meeting the President of the United States due to his signing legislation finally outlawing live-birth abortions; and finally, as a consequence, my meeting her.

All of those seemingly unrelated events are, in fact, all related, and I believe have a purpose – without a doubt, many purposes.

I believe that at least one of those purposes is to have that young woman touch people's lives – people like me; and through people like me, to have her touch lives like yours.

I believe I have been given an opportunity – meeting Gianna and being invited to speak to you today – to give you a message of hope about our society and the people who lead it as you embark upon the rest of your lives and your careers.

I believe it is my responsibility to pass along a message to you that character and integrity are important, if not necessary, to the your success, as well as the success of our nation and our world.

Character and integrity will be difficult to sustain, but not difficult to find if you know where to look and how to look.

It took the coming together of many disparate things – problems at my workplace in Harrisburg, a night at a pro-life dinner, the difference

between reading everyone else's opinion and trusting my own judgment – for me to finally see this point as I should have all along.

I will continue to disagree with the President about aspects of the war in Iraq; just as many people will continue to disagree with me about abortion, emergency contraception, transportation issues, and even paving the streets in Hunker Borough.

I appreciate that reasonable people can, and should, disagree about these things.

But we need to peel away the cynicism and hate.

For this society to move forward – and for you to move forward successfully in your lives – you will have to be able to peel away all of the layers that surround people and issues and find that kernel of character and integrity.

That is the part of the person you want to emulate, and that is the part of the person on which you want to model your life.

Solving problems is not based on beating another man's brains out – it's not a zero-sum game – it's not about winning the argument.

It's about having character and dignity and integrity...and respecting that in others, even as you wrestle with your disagreements and problems.

It's about working with others who have character and integrity to make yourself more successful person and to make this world a better place.

While today is a day you'll long remember for its importance in your life, my speech more than likely will not be something you remember for long.

That's probably just as well, but I do sincerely hope my jumbled thoughts have coalesced at least enough to leave you with one simple notion – even if you eventually cannot remember where it came from:

Do not choose people to emulate in life based on whether they agree with you, if they are pleasant to be around, if they say or do the right things in company, if they are a good time, if they pay lots of attention to you.

These things are a great recipe for the guest list at a party, but not for a mentor, friend or partner.

Instead, choose people to emulate based on their character and their integrity...and leave yourself open to see that character and integrity.

Finally, always stand up for the right things – and do the right things – even when no one is watching.

Thank you very much.

Congratulations, God bless and good luck to all of you.

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