

Transcript of Allison Miller's Commencement Address for Sherwood Class of 2010. (given on June 9th, 2010 at Constitution Hall (DAR) in Washington DC.)

Hello Everybody. Good Afternoon. Welcome graduates. Also, welcome to your family, friends, teachers, and all those who are here to celebrate your accomplishments. Every single person in this room should be proud!

Graduates, you've done so much to get to this point. Congratulations. Getting here has been no small feat. In fact it has been no small feat for me either. I got on a plane early this morning in Charleston, SC and am getting right back on a plane after this ceremony so I can make it back to Charleston for my 9 o'clock show.

It is an absolute honor to speak at your graduation ceremony. I am so pleased that you, Sherwood HS class of 2010 chose me, from Sherwood class of 1992, to speak. (That is the year some of you were born, right?) We can all agree that Sherwood HS and the warriors are the best! What a tremendous place to receive a HS education. Sherwood has the best teachers ... I am pretty sure we learned from some of the same teachers. Let's give a shout out to Bill Evans, Joe Reiff, Judy Adler, Scott Beattie, Gean Orndorff.

Before I move on, I would like to get something off of my chest. I actually don't remember the commencement speaker at my own Sherwood graduation. I honestly regret this. I am sure I missed out on some pertinent advice. I was too busy daydreaming about my summer beach plans and anticipating the graduation parties later that night. I can't even imagine how distracted I would have been if cell phones and texting existed back in 1992. I am hoping that you, Class of 2010, don't make this same mistake. I don't think you will. You are too smart for that and there is a reason why you chose me to speak today. I am not your typical graduation speaker. Maybe that is why you chose me. Maybe you are looking for an unorthodox perspective. A perspective from someone who makes their living traveling around the world playing rock and roll. Well, I am here to offer that unorthodox perspective. I hope that I meet your expectations and provide at least

one nugget of positive advice for each and every one of you. Standing up here feels way more “rock star” than playing drums in front of thousands of people. So, I really do thank you and am truly moved.

Let me tell you a little bit more about myself.

I grew up in Olney MD and was the first graduating class from the newly renovated Sherwood HS. I started drumming at the age of 10. Drumming was all I ever wanted to do. Well, I did having a fleeting moment when I dreamt of becoming a professional basketball player. But, luckily the drumming thing worked out cause I stopped growing at 5 feet 2 inches. I continued drumming all throughout HS and was heavily involved in Rock-n-Roll Revival, Jazz Band, and Concert Band. After HS I attended WVU, and graduated in May of 1996. 3 months later, after a cross country camping trip, I landed smack dab in the middle of NYC in a tiny studio apartment next to an all night taxi gas station. Quite a harsh introduction to the Big Apple but I was determined to make a career in music and I knew that NYC was the place for me. I started off taking any work I could get. I would play in the subways, and I would play the 2 to 6 am shift at nightclubs. But, I loved it and am happy to say have always made my living hitting on things. Yes, I am fortunate to do what I love for a living. But, I am also very determined and disciplined. I put in the work and I could never imagine myself doing anything but playing music. I now make my living drumming all over the world, writing, producing and recording music, and teaching. I live in Brooklyn NY.

So, let's get to more important things. YOU! Graduating seniors, you all must be so excited to finally be done with HS. So thrilled for the next stage of life. Nervous but excited to be “on your own” and to feel a new sense of freedom as an adult. I know I was. But, before we move forward into adulthood and freedom, lets go back 4 years. Imagine yourself on your first day as a freshman. Some of you were excited. Some of you were totally ready to tackle the challenges of HS. Most of you were trying desperately to hide the terror that consumed you. Am I right? I know I was! Now, think about all that you have been through during your HS years and how much you have changed over the past four years. You probably feel like a completely different person. Let me tell you something. This change and growth is just the tip of the iceberg.

You can't even imagine what changes are in store for you over the years to come. It will blow your mind. Trust me! Life really is a rollercoaster. Enjoy the ride. Enjoy all the twists, and turns, and loops.

You have proved that you are ready for this "wild ride of life" by successfully completing HS and by receiving your diploma today. You are now ready to pursue your dreams.

So, Class of 2010, what are your dreams? Who do you want to be in this world?

These are overwhelming questions. Questions that I, when sitting where you are sitting today, had no clue how to answer, and, to be honest, sometimes still struggle to answer. Each individual has his or her own dream. And, each person's dream might change an infinite number of times. One of you might strive to be a lawyer, a few of you might want to be doctors, mechanics, journalists, artists, professional athletes, stay at home parents, teachers, business owners, writers, a musician like me. All of these goals are unique to each person and each one of these requires different training and education.

Class of 2010, let me tell you something-- Life is exciting! All of it! The ups and the downs, the hardships and the triumphs, the new loves and the heartbreaks. Each and every situation is an adventure and each and every adventure is a "life lesson" and will help mold you into the person you are to be.

You are also about to find out that The World is HUGE: A lot bigger than the space within the walls of Sherwood HS, or the Sherwood Warriors Football field, or the town of Olney MD. I am gonna say this again: THE WORLD IS HUGE and filled with all kinds of exciting adventures.

Years ago, my travels led me to a snorkeling opportunity in the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia. How many of you have ever been scuba diving or snorkeling? Raise your hand. It is breathtaking, right! I felt like I had received a secret pass allowing me into a magical, otherworldly place. A whole different civilization and ecosystem, filled with exotic fish and living plants. All relying on each other for existence

and survival. All working together to keep the coral reef alive. One big living creature. Absolutely Fascinating!

Ever since that snorkeling experience I have walked through my life on land holding onto that same sense of amazement that I felt when I first set eyes on the coral reef... what magical person or event might present themselves around the corner? Each morning, I wake up and get to explore more of the mysterious world. I cherish this opportunity to learn something new everyday.

So, I was thinking: This HUGE world is like one mega Reef in the glorious ocean. It is waiting for you to explore. Life, much like snorkeling explorations, requires some essential gear and knowledge. You'd be crazy to just jump in the ocean without your snorkeling gear. You wouldn't even be able to hold your breath long enough to get a peek at the reef and you would probably get eaten by sharks.

Here are three tools I believe will help you survive in life: CURIOSITY, RESPONSIBILITY and DISCIPLINE. You need all of these traits to prepare for life. You might be thinking: "I won't die if I lack curiosity!" Yes, that is true, you won't die, but you won't be living! I repeat: You will not be LIVING!

Let's start with my favorite piece of "life gear." CURIOSITY! Yes, CURIOSITY is the key to a good life. It is your oxygen tank! It keeps you alive! It is impossible to live a good, fruitful and productive life without curiosity. And, as far as I am concerned, it is essential for survival.

Listen to the definition of the word curiosity:
CURIOSITY: An eagerness to continue gaining knowledge and expand ones mind. An interminable interest of ones surroundings

Think about that definition. It is brilliant. "An eagerness to continue gaining knowledge." Wow...eagerness is such a powerful word. Eagerness knows no boredom! It doesn't have time for it. As the great Dorothy Parker said: "The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity." I love that! Curiosity feeds on itself. It breeds more curiosity. And, with Curiosity by your side, anything is possible! Your dreams are attainable.

What I'm saying is: FOREVER BE A STUDENT. Soak up all that life brings your way. There is something to be taken from every interaction. From student teacher relationships, to the person sitting next to you on the train, to a barista at Starbucks. Life is the greatest classroom there is.

One of the greatest joys is to be in the world aware, not only of all that you do know but conscious of the fact that there is so much you don't know. I am constantly reminded of how much I don't know. Very HUMBLING!

Curiosity is the key to maintaining a "thirst" for learning throughout life! Whether it is through "higher education," private instruction, trade school, reading, traveling, exploring... Curiosity helps keep the mind open to new ideas, creativity, and imagination. Curiosity allows space for questioning. It knows no limits. It will lead to a plethora of challenging yet rewarding experiences. Experiences that will mold each one of you into the WHOLE adult person you want to be.

I never, in a million years, thought that leading a curious life would open me up to so many mind-blowing situations: I have trudged thru 4 feet of snow in Siberia, eaten raw horse in Japan, fed lemurs in Madagascar, eaten jellyfish in China, eaten snake in Vietnam, eaten alligator in Kenya... I guess I like to eat a lot! I have played concerts inside ancient roman ruins. And, I would never have known, until traveling in Thailand, that a family of four, with groceries for four, could fit on one scooter.

So, have I made my point about Curiosity? It is the "oxygen tank" that keeps us living!

Ok. So, what enables us to practice Curiosity? FREEDOM! Freedom is that first jump in the ocean! It is that first jump into the adult world. Freedom gives you the opportunity to extend your curiosity to places you never knew existed. Freedom feels good. Trust me, it can feel like flying. You become your own person. You get to know yourself and you make your own decisions. You choose your own fate. You decide where your body goes and what goes into your body.

But, here's the thing about Freedom: with freedom comes Responsibility.

Once you jump into the ocean, what do you do? Do you flail around until you collapse from exhaustion or do you compose yourself, and calming start to tread water? You have a responsibility as a member of society to pursue your goals and adventures with maturity, aware of your surroundings. A responsibility to be honorable: to yourself and others, responsibility to not hurt anyone, responsible to know when to be selfish and when to be selfless, responsibility to be self-sufficient, a little humility to keep your ego in check! (An inflated ego can easily cause all kinds of problems in life. Trust, me, I know. I was a bit too arrogant in my twenties and it definitely caused me trouble.)

With freedom you can make your own choices but be aware of what those choices mean. Often times the right choice is the hardest one to make. Who do you want to be? Make your choices as THAT person. What do you believe in? What do you value? Get to know yourself. This is your time to explore yourself and the world around you. Take advantage of it. Enjoy this freedom. But make sure you are carrying with you, RESPONSIBILITY.

This leaves us with, last but not least, DISCIPLINE. We all want to be the best swimmer possible as we explore the ocean. You can't just into the ocean and start swimming. You have to learn how to swim. This takes discipline. Practice makes perfect, or, at least, better! With discipline you will swim faster, with more agility and with less effort. Discipline will help you develop the skills required for your career and will help you become a master at what you do. My life as a professional drummer is pretty fabulous now. But, it wasn't always that way. It was only attainable because I put in 8 hours a day of practicing for years. Talent and smarts only go so far. "Success is 10% talent, 90% hard work." DISCIPLINE can be painful at times ... all your friends are partying while you are working. Who wants to miss out on all fun? It can be a total drag. But, trust me, the hard work WILL pay off! Then you can throw your own parties.

So, those are three of the most important tools for survival. But, the toolbox will never run out of room. The more you live, the more tools you will acquire. What you do with these tools and how you apply them to life is up to you.

So, take this time to really get in touch with who you are and what your passions are. Because, if you are lucky, what you do will be an extension of who you are. What comes from that is happiness, joy, and fulfillment. And, take it from me; there is nothing better. Sounds simple but is true and profound. Happiness is also extremely contagious. Your happiness will touch the hearts of all who surround you. And I would say that is definitely making the world a better place.

Remember, Life happens. That we know! We can't control every aspect of our destiny. But, we can keep an open mind leading a life spearheaded by curiosity, responsibility and discipline. Be aware of your surroundings. This will leave you open to all the different possibilities presented throughout life. There are many surprising corners in the Great Barrier Reef. There are also many secret detours. Hidden crevices disguised by seaweed, plankton, and sea urchins. Don't be deterred or misled. Use your integrity and discretion to decide which detours feel like a good idea and which might not work out so well. You never know which way will lead you to a new and exciting opportunity!

Graduates, thank you again for this new and exciting opportunity. You have helped me discover new possibilities in life and that is an absolute gift.

I wish you luck and hope that you find joy in all of your future adventures in this fantastic world. Jump in! This is your time!

Thank you, Sherwood Class of 2010.