

Piedmont High Graduation

Class of 2022

It is a real honor to be back here to celebrate the great Piedmont High School Class of 2022.

This is an unstoppable class. Even a devastating global pandemic could not stop this class from graduating. Masks, and PCR tests, and being isolated from your friends for a year-and-a-half could not stop you.

Zoom could not stop you. And I get it that Zoom wasn't your friend.

Thanks to Zoom, there wasn't any way to hide in the back row any more. Every teacher could see your name. And the most common instruction you received from your teachers was: "you need to get off mute." And yet here you are. Graduates.

I know you all endured much, much more than that to get to this day – and yet you are here. This is not just a commencement speaker sucking

up by telling you that you are special. The Class of 2022 is truly an extraordinary and resilient class.

Until a few days ago, I had planned to deliver a different commencement address today. I was going to give you a version of the remarks I delivered here at Witter 5 years ago. They concerned how to have a job you enjoy, spend your money wisely, stay healthy, have good relationships, and improve each year.

I will send you that speech if you'd like to see it. It has some real advice. I promise.

But your class is different from the class of 2017, and I'm different today. And this moment in time is different.

So I want to speak to you instead about just one thing. Courage.

I'm going to tell you four stories of courage that I've witnessed or experienced, or wished for.

My first story doesn't concern a great act of courage. It's a small act. But it's a situation that is familiar to most of us. And it's a reminder that courage is a skill we can develop, that we can practice, by listening to our conscience.

Many years ago I was with three other law school grads having a drink. One of the guys got up to go to the bathroom, and one of the other guys with us said something snarky about him. I don't even remember what it was. But I did what we usually do. I nodded and laughed and went along. But the remaining person looked at both of us and said "C'mon. He's a good guy. We don't need to bag on him behind his back. We're better than that."

The guy who said that was Barack Obama.

And in the moment he said it, I realized: “I wished I’d said that.” Rather than going along, fitting in, egging on an insult; I could have done the right thing. And that feeling stayed with me. With just a few words, it had an impact. It made me want to be better — to take a stand even when it is uncomfortable. Even when the person you’re standing up for will never know.

Each one of us can change someone’s life each day through simple acts of courage, acts that have no physical risk. But they make us, and those around us, better.

The next story concerns my great grand-parents. Their courage was different; it was the courage of immigrants. My great grandparents faced persecution and poverty in Eastern Europe for years. They waited, and hesitated. They did not know if there was a better life out there, and so they resisted change. But at some point, they decided that even if their life elsewhere would be no better, they owed it to

their children and grandchildren to at least try. They left behind everything they had, everyone they knew and loved, to come to America. Their family members who remained, our ancestors in Europe, perished in the Holocaust. I do not have heirlooms, or pictures, or distant cousins I can find on 23andMe. The only place our family exists is in America. It was the one nation that let my great-grandparents in, and gave them a chance. And that took courage, too.

So I owe a debt to my great grandparents and to the people who welcomed them. Because I know this: I would not be alive today were it not for the courage of my ancestors, and the courage of people from this Country who were willing to take them in.

Each day is the gift that others' courage gave me. We don't stand on the shoulders of giants. We stand on the shoulders of people just like us; people who struggle with these decisions and who are uncertain. But in the end, they had a choice, and they chose to take

risks and sacrifice for a greater good. And all they expected from us is to do the same.

My third story is about political courage.

When I was the U.S. Ambassador in Australia I was often asked about gun violence. For two decades leading up to 1996, there had been a mass shooting nearly every year in Australia.

But then in 1996, there was a mass shooting that shocked the entire country. Citizens from both parties demanded action. And that moment of horror became a movement. Every political leader understood this. The time had come to stop this madness. Despite the threat of losing their seats, the conservative government voted to ban assault weapons, require complete background checks, and buy back and destroy these weapons.

This was controversial, and after it passed several conservative politicians lost their seats in rural districts. But after it passed, there were no mass shootings that year, or the next year, or the next 25 years. That's right, there hasn't been a mass shooting in Australia since that legislation passed 25 years ago.

I visited with a couple of the officials who had lost their seats in Parliament, to ask them about their decision. One of them said to me: "I knew I'd lose my seat. The proudest thing I ever did in Parliament was cast that vote that cost me my re-election. I didn't run for office so that I could stay in office. I ran for office so that I could make a positive difference in people's lives. There are hundreds of people alive today who would have lost their lives to gun violence. I would not trade that for anything. Not anything."

Courage is measured not by how much people are willing to do to win. It is measured by how much they would be willing to lose.

Which brings me to my last story; it's both personal and political. And it's about what happens without courage.

In 1999, I received a call from the White House. Thirteen high school students, people your age or younger, had been senselessly killed with assault weapons by two students in their class. It shocked our Country. Then-President Clinton had been reading everything he could find about gun violence. Somehow he'd read an article I'd written with one of my professors years earlier.

The people at the White House said that President Clinton liked my article. He wanted to talk to me about heading up a youth violence commission to help prevent more school shootings.

My wife Becky and I had three young kids then. I had just made partner at a law firm, we had no savings (because, of course, we'd just bought a house in Piedmont), and I didn't want to move to DC. So I told the

White House I wasn't really qualified and that there were real experts out there who would be better than I was.

A few days later, I got another call from the White House. They said the President wanted to see me. I flew to DC and met with President Clinton. It was the first time I'd ever met a President. And he asked me a very simple question. What would it mean to me, if someone else were willing to give up their job and do something difficult, simply because it might save the life of one of my children. I said it would mean everything to me. He said "If you do this job, it will mean everything to every other parent in America. Are you willing to give up your job if it might save some of their children's lives?"

There was only one answer to this.

"Yes."

So I left my job as a law firm partner. And I took the job.

For the next two years I worked all over America. I visited the shell-shocked communities where these shootings occurred. I sat with parents and saw the empty chair at their table -- their daily reminder of the child who was never coming back. I visited parents like that in towns you have never heard of, in Jonesboro, and Springfield, and Paducah, and towns shattered and haunted by these shootings. It changed me forever. I can still see the pain and bewilderment on their faces. Those images will not go away. The question that haunted them all was "why?"

There were answers. And there were things we could do, just as they did in Australia. Americans weren't genetically more violent than other people. We were just governed differently. There were things we could do that had worked in other countries. In fact, every other developed nation in the world has stopped these sorts of mass shootings.

So we provided that information to Congress -- about the mental health and counseling programs that could help, public information campaigns about warning signs, about ways other nations restricted access to assault weapons, and required background checks for all gun owners, and kept guns away from people who were dangerous to themselves or others.

The only challenge we faced was that the NRA opposed background checks and the assault weapons ban. Some members in close elections might lose their seats over these measures. It would take courage.

And some members of Congress would need to risk sacrificing their own job to potentially save the lives of someone else's child. They had the same question that I had, and that those leaders in Australia had.

"Would you be willing to give up your own job, to save a child's life?"

But this time, their answer was "no."

Instead, they voted to make assault weapons more easily available. The number of young people killed in our schools by gun

violence after that year has kept growing. By 2012, it had tripled. Even in the face of 20 second graders and their teachers being gunned down at Sandy Hook Elementary School, they did nothing. Members of Congress who could have made a difference did nothing . . . except keep their jobs. In the 10 years since, there have been 900 more shootings on school grounds in America. Firearms are now the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of 24. We have lost thousands of young people to senseless gun violence for one reason – because of the absence of courage.

And then this week it happened again. At Robb Elementary School.

And Senators who you'd think would finally tell us "enough is enough, take my job." Instead tell us to take their thoughts and prayers.

Jesus.

But I haven't lost hope.

I haven't lost hope because as a young man sitting with friends one night, I have seen how even one small act of courage can give others courage.

I haven't lost hope because a nation that had the courage to welcome my great grand-parents and give sanctuary to millions of others is a courageous nation.

I haven't lost hope, I have seen political leaders in every other modern nation risk the highest offices in their land to do the right thing.

But most of all, I have not lost hope, because I know courage exists in all of us, and calls out to all of us.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed that his life would be taken from him by violence long before his time. He received constant death threats throughout his brief life. He struggled with what this would mean for his wife, for his children, for those who had placed their faith in him. But he found peace in realizing that obeying his conscience was

his only option. He simply could not live with the alternatives -- cowardice, expediency, or vanity. He wrote "Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right."

In my life, I've tried to live by these words. I've also received threats — death threats, anonymous letters under the door of my house, one plot against my life, a person who actually tried to drive their car through the gate of the Embassy. Fortunately, he was driving a Peugeot sedan, so he didn't do much damage. And I've received violent hateful messages for positions I've taken on public matters, or simply for holding a public office. I've worried a lot about my wife and kids. And I've also missed out on some dreams. I had hoped to be a federal judge one day, and I was advised that I would lose that chance if I kept

speaking out on gun violence. But for me, I found peace in the words of Dr. King. Would I stand for what I believed in, or would I sit in that safe office I coveted regretting for the rest of my days that I'd stayed silent and simply done the convenient thing?

I don't say this to suggest that I've done anything special. I didn't. I haven't done anything more than any decent person would do. And so that is my advice to you. Listen to that voice of decency in your head. There is an impulse for justice and for freedom that exists in each of us, that is in constant battle with our fears. But the history of human progress is the history of people listening to that voice in their head. A woman in Ukraine confronts a Russian soldier. An Afghan girl attends a school. A black man sets foot on the Edmund Petrus bridge and walks toward clubs and guns and dogs. A Chinese student steps in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square. A young person comes out. A protester raises a sign.

So when the day comes when you are asked “would you give up your job to save a child’s life?” listen to that voice in your head. Courage is everywhere and it is in all people. Courage is what challenges us. Courage is what defines us. Courage is what sustains us.

That courage is within you, the resilient class of 2022. Go forward and let it inspire others.