

COMMENCEMENT, 2019

LOWELL MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM
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CHIEF ROBERT BONGIORNO BEDFORD POLICE DEPARTMENT

President Mabry, members of the Board of Trustees, Deans, faculty, administrators, honored guests, and *most importantly, the stars of the day, the Class of 2019* - First things first: Give yourselves a raucous round of applause. This is the day you've been waiting for, and you need to bask in this spotlight!

My name is Robert Bongiorno, and I serve as Chief of Police for the Town of Bedford. It is a tremendous honor to speak to all of you on a day that celebrates you and your successes – the ones that brought you to this point and the ones you will achieve after you cross this stage.

Success is one of the things I want to talk with you about today. I am not a politician, a CEO in corporate America, a famous athlete and I am ABSOLUTELY NOT a gifted singer. I stand before you today simply as a super proud alum of this institution who has experienced the benefits of MCC's faculty and student engagement efforts firsthand.

I sat in your position way, way, way back in the ancient year of 1993. Show of hands – how many of you weren't even born in 1993? [*Many students raised their hands!*]

Great. Like I need to feel old.

As I look out into your faces, I see familiar expressions and I know a lot of you are wondering "what's next?" I know that because I went through those exact same emotions, doubts, and fears.

I'm a police officer. Some of you would say, a cop. That means different things to different people. I always knew I wanted to be a cop, but it took me a long time to understand exactly what that meant – what being a police officer means to a community, to victims of crime, to criminals. I thought it was all about locking up bad guys— and maybe once in a while, one of them would try to fight me.

It was in the middle of me trying to sort out my personal life choices that I came to Middlesex — in my youth, before I was educated about the world.

Stop me if you can relate to this – I enrolled in college classes with a specific goal. In my case, to study criminal justice. But I just wanted to get going with a career, so I didn't stick with college and apply myself as best I could, and I stopped being a full-time student. I left to get that all-important job I had been seeking, went on to attend the Department of

Correction academy, became a Corrections Officer and then realized if I really wanted to pursue my dream to its fullest, I actually needed that college degree. So I came back to Middlesex. And then I left again, to attend the police academy. I became a police officer and then FINALLY came back to MCC to finish and obtain my associates degree, which led me to my eventual Master's degree.

So yeah, MY two-year degree at MCC took me more than four years. I may not have followed the script to the letter, but I knew at the end of the journey what I needed was that degree.

One of my professors at Middlesex was the legendary Joe Gardner, who is here with us today. Stand up Joe, and please, give this incredible faculty member a huge round of applause. Almost three decades later, Joe continues to mentor me and other students and police chiefs from throughout our region. Joe is exactly the type of dedicated faculty that Middlesex provides for its students.

I will say, in hindsight, however, that Professor Gardner didn't really need to give me the C on that paper. He said he gave me the C to help make me stronger. I didn't buy it then, or now, Joe. That one still stings! President Mabry – is it possible to get that expunged from my record after today?

Professor Gardner and other faculty like the late Don Melisi challenged me intellectually and practically. I would listen to them in rapt attention in class and talk to them and ask questions and ask for advice when the class ended. Thanks to the unbridled dedication of the faculty at MCC, I started to grow as a professional.

That's one of those special things about Middlesex Community College – you learn a lot in the classroom and if you choose, you learn a whole lot more at Middlesex outside the lecture hall.

My early career and experience at MCC helped me understand what being a police officer truly meant. It taught me that if I wanted to be successful, there was more to being a police officer than just catching a bad guy. It was about leadership, training, thirst for knowledge and a willingness to give back, which continues each and every day of my life.

Today is considered a graduation, though colleges and universities call it “Commencement” – and Commencement is an interesting word, as it means “the beginning.” While today may feel like the end of a long journey – it did for me—today marks a new beginning. It is the beginning of a future with fewer limitations and more opportunities. More open doors. And remember - it is not the end of your relationships with your classmates or your professors—I still haunt mine 26 years later!

It is, however the end of the road for many of the limitations and excuses that may have held you back in the past. Middlesex Community College has helped remove those barriers for you—and with the degrees you earned today, the college has been made it much easier

for you to advance in your career, start a new career or continue earning a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, or your doctorate.

Middlesex Community College has brought you this far, and after you walk out these doors today, it is up to you to bravely take those next steps.

I'm going to challenge you to do one better. Take the hard work, grit, common sense and determination you applied here and apply it somewhere else. In my role as police chief, I look for **workers** when I'm hiring new officers. MCC students are workers –you are dedicated, determined, savvy, smart and reliable. This ever-changing and uncertain world needs more people like you, so continue to invest in yourselves. You're worth it. Professors Gardner and Melisi made me believe that about myself.

Here I stand today, a proud alum and the Chief of Police in Bedford. One of my proudest accomplishments as chief has been helping to support your unique and incredibly valuable Campus Resource Officer program - you have led the way right here at Middlesex, and I applaud the Board of Trustees and President for supporting a program to keep our students, faculty and staff safe on your campuses.

You students were fortunate to have dual campuses on which to learn – the sprawling suburban campus on 200 acres in Bedford and the urban landscape here in downtown Lowell. It is a direct result of the commitment of this faculty and staff along with great leaders **in those buildings** that MCC has become the top community college in Massachusetts.

I have another request – I would respectfully ask the graduates to stand and give another raucous round of applause for this staff and faculty.

Success is also about trusting your teammates while remaining trustworthy and reliable to them in return. My path was not traditional; as I'm sure some of yours were not. But my path always forced me to work hard. It forced me to work with other people without leaning too heavily on them as a crutch. Teammates should climb together and help their teammates in need. Successful teams are comprised of equal partners sharing the load.

With that in mind, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank my loving wife Christine, who is here today. Christine is not only my best friend and a much more accomplished professional than I am, but she has shown me the true meaning of teamwork and helped me understand what is possible when people lift each other up as partners and teammates. She has dedicated her life to public service as the Director of Health and Human Services for the Town of Arlington. I could not ask for a better partner.

So, to recap - successful people work hard, learn for life, and form team bonds.

But successful people also give back.

Early in my career, working as a police officer in Arlington, we had to respond to a house fire on Christmas Eve. A little boy watched all of his Christmas presents burn. Myself and

several officers pooled our money and purchased last minute toys so that boy would still have a Christmas morning at the hotel where his family was forced to relocate.

It was a small gesture, but it was a powerful reminder that as a police officer, I was in a unique situation to do something for a family in their moment of need.

I have been blessed to remain connected to this institution. Now, I challenge you today to stay involved. MCC has an active alumni association that I have proudly joined. This inspirational alumni association can help you network and connect with professionals in your field and it provides you the opportunity to find a way to give back through your knowledge and experience to help those following in your footsteps. I fervently urge you to join the alumni group and find some way to give back to your communities and to the future students who will be following your paths.

But I suppose everyone tells you to give back and help others, right? Why? How does that make you more successful? I thought about this, and here's my answer: When we're always thinking about how to improve and help ourselves, how to do things for ourselves – and let's face it, we have to do that sometimes—it can make you mentally tired and physically restless. But when you do something to help another person, it reminds you about why we're here.

Sure, building a house for habitat for humanity may be physically tiring, but you can fix exhaustion with a good night's sleep. If you're feeling mentally drained, that's a bigger challenge—my advice is to build the house.

Finally today, successful people are mindful of their legacy. WHAT WILL YOURS BE?

I'd like to share five quick lessons that have guided me through life and helped me define my own legacy.

1. How do you handle adversity?

You will fail many times in life. I have. I was up for my first promotion to sergeant earlier in my career. I thought I was the better candidate. I thought I earned it, but I didn't receive the promotion. I was upset. But I got some great advice – people are watching you. They are looking at how you handle adversity and how you move forward when something doesn't go your way. Are you going to sulk and act out, or are you going to act like a professional and move on? The chief of police promoted me to sergeant in the next round, and he told me that I had earned it and impressed him with how I handled adversity the last time.

2. Stay humble.

In 2007, I had the pleasure of meeting Mark J. Sullivan, then-director of the United States Secret Service. I was an Arlington Police lieutenant, and he is an Arlington native. We talked for a bit and he gave me his office number and told me to keep in touch. Nearly a full year later, I was preparing to attend the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Virginia,

and I called Director Sullivan for the first time to ask him for guidance. I called his office, expecting to talk to an assistant. Instead, he answered the phone himself, remembered me, and spent an hour on the phone giving me advice. I'll never forget the experience, realizing one of the most powerful people in American law enforcement answers his own phone.

3. Don't take yourself too seriously.

No matter what rank or status you achieve in life, don't forget to laugh at the jokes. And never be afraid to laugh at yourself. The best form of humor is self-deprecating humor—it keeps you grounded. I almost couldn't be here today, because my mom asked me to help her move some heavy boxes. I told her I couldn't make it because I had been asked to be the commencement speaker at my Alma mater. She looked at me, raised an eyebrow and said, “Bob, if you don't have time to help me, just say so, but don't make up stories!”

4. Don't be a victim-based thinker

When you face adversity in life, don't assume everybody is out to get you. Stand fast. Look around. Don't blame others for things that you can control or for things that you can do better next time.

5. Worry only about the things you can change.

Don't get bogged down by things you can't control. You'll lose your perspective on life that way. Work on the things you can control. If you can't change it – DON'T COMPLAIN.

Those are some of the things have helped me in my life and career. You will add your own to the list for sure.

More than anything, your success depends on your willingness to be a student for life. You can learn something new every day, even if you're the best and most accomplished person in your field.

Albert Einstein, perhaps the smartest person who ever lived, and certainly a lot smarter than this guy standing here before you today, once said “Intellectual growth should commence at birth and cease only at death.” I couldn't have said it better myself. No really, I couldn't. That might be why Professor Gardner gave me that C.

Enjoy today. Celebrate your successes, plot your own course for future successes, and never, ever, ever stop learning.

Thank you Middlesex Community College and thank you all. Congratulations to the class of 2019! Welcome to the ever-expanding club of MCC alumni!