

It was graduation last week at NCCC and it was awesome! This graduation saw the stands full again without any COVID restrictions, and boy was the crowd into it! I just had to say, "Will the graduates please rise" and there was thunderous yelling and applause. I hadn't even gotten to the "move your tassel" part yet! Such great support for our graduates.

We had a large number of our Career and Technical Education graduates come to commencement this year. They brought their families and friends out in force! We honored students who achieved their certificate in welding, construction, HVAC, allied health, electrical technology, Aerostructures, and industrial maintenance technology, graduating alongside all of our degree holding nurses, and associate of arts and sciences. All are needed out in the workforce and it was great to see them cross the stage together.

Also, we had a wonderful performance of the National Anthem by our choir. And for the first time in decades, the new college band performed Pomp and Circumstance live! That was fantastic!

Anita Cooper, Southeast Regional Director for the Kansas Department for Children and Families, was our Distinguished Alum and gave a great speech about the importance of service to the community. Service to others is one of the secrets to happiness and Anita did a great job letting our students know that.

In my line of work, and with kids of my own getting older, you can imagine that I have heard my share of graduation speeches. There have been awesome ones where the speaker was famous or they did a cool demonstration on stage during the speech. And there was the one where the president of another institution talked for 20 minutes on the college's strategic plan. These people are graduating, they don't want to hear about cool things you are doing AFTER they leave.

I have found that there are common themes in these addresses. Often times graduation speeches are filled with comments promoting the importance of hard work and determination as the keys to success. The new degree may get you the job, but elbow grease, dependability, creativity, flexibility, and people skills will help you keep it and advance. This is a common message. And of course, this message is true most of the time. It's also sometimes true that people work hard and still lose their jobs. Somebody's incompetent nephew gets the position instead of you, or the business goes out of business, that kind of thing.

I don't give a graduation speech at our commencement, but if I did, I would go one step beyond the importance of hard work and success. Those who have climbed the ladder of success often find that there is not much at the top, certainly not happiness. Not unless you take others with you on that ladder and use that success to make a difference.

There is a famous story about the actor Jim Carrey and his determination for success. In 1985 he wrote himself a check for \$10 million dated 10 years in the future. He wanted to work to make that check good. In 1995, he signed a movie contract for "Dumb and Dumber" for \$10 million. He had done it. He made his definition of success happen. But now he stated that it took the rest of his life to realize that goal was an empty one. He came to realize that success is not happiness, that he should have done things differently and served others along the way.

Anita, our graduation speaker, and Jim Carrey agree about the importance of service to others. I think about Mike and CeCe Mitchell and the success they have had in life. They are now using that success to help NCCC build the Mitchell Career and Technology Center. We also had tremendous help from the Sunderland family and others, and now from Monarch Cement, and Orizon, successful individuals and companies who channel part of their success into helping others.

Lastly, I would tell our graduates about the other secret to happiness, the capacity to love. I have tried to teach this to my girls over their childhood. I'm about to see if one of them learned it or not.

Here is the lesson – the greatest decision in your life that is directly tied to your happiness is not about your career choice, your major in college, or what college you choose to attend. It's not about what you buy, or where you choose to live. It's who you choose to marry.

So much of my happiness is due to my relationship with my wife, Jennifer. Through many career and job changes for the two of us, tragedy and near-tragedy, from constant changes to stability, it's been the two of us. We have a saying in our house - We love each other and the rest is just details.

As a child of multiple parental divorces and marriages I know how that upheaval plays havoc on kids and adults alike. I know it is difficult to predict if the person you marry at say, 22, will be the same person at 32, or 52. But, if you can make it together, life is so much happier. I told my girls be as sure as you can be if you make or accept that proposal.

Why is this on my mind right now? My oldest daughter got engaged a few weeks ago. Josh is a great young man, positive, witty, loving, and makes her his priority. He does use puns a bit too much, but I can forgive him that. They met in college and finished their degrees at the same time. He's working his way through the Sedgwick County Deputy training program right now, because he wants to make a difference. They are set to be married next spring.

Is he the one to help bring her happiness? She certainly believes so. They dated for two years so she has had ample time to make that determination. Jen and I dated for only three months before we got engaged. That was nearly 28 years ago.

Abrielle has the "service to others" part on the path to happiness. She works with underprivileged pre-school kids and volunteers with Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Now she has demonstrated the capacity to love and be loved. I believe she is and will be happy in life with Josh.

So graduates, work hard, be determined, and focus on creativity and flexibility. Improve those people skills, take calculated risks, and climb that ladder of success. But remember, that ladder leads to success, not happiness. Serving others and finding the right one to love - that matters so much more.

If you have any questions about this column or anything else about the college, or love for that matter, email me at binbody@neosho.edu.