

Joshua Brady Branch

Address at the Paterno Fellows Commencement Ceremony, May 4, 2013

Thank you very much, Dr. Selzer, for the introduction; and good morning everyone!

I would like to thank our guests: Deans Welch, Long and Upneja; members of the Paterno family; faculty, advisors and distinguished visitors; family and friends who are traveling from near and far to be here this weekend. The diverse audience here today truly speaks to the different backgrounds Paterno Fellows come from. And of course, I would be remiss to forget my fellow classmates; if you haven't already breathed a sigh of relief just yet you may, because you've made it. I, on the other hand, will wait until I'm comfortably in my seat after the conclusion of this speech.

When I was first asked to deliver this speech a month ago I found the timing intriguing. I had just finished my Excellence in Communication Certificate requirements and thought, "Boy we're really going to put that certificate title to the test." In one sense, I suppose I've become the test dummy for this certificate title.

I was asked to reflect on my experiences as a Paterno Fellow and in doing so I can't help but begin by having a quick flash back to my decision to attend Penn State.

Some students selected Penn State because their parents were alumni, they had fallen in love with a major, or they loved the camaraderie. For myself, like so many of my best stories often start out, chasing a young woman to Penn State largely influenced my decision. While the decision to chase that young woman may not have been the best choice, selecting Penn State was.

I came to Penn State as mostly a B student. In high school I often didn't study for tests, stared at the clock on the wall more than the teacher, and found more enjoyment in hitting the pads rather than hitting the books. In fact, if you would tell my high school graduating class that I would become a Schreyer Honors College student, study abroad at the University of Oxford, take graduate courses in my senior year of college, or make it to the third round of Penn State's Rhodes Scholarship nomination, they would probably all give you a long drawn out, "reaaallly???"

That transformation from sluggish to studious is thanks in large part to friends and family, professors who challenged me, and of course the Paterno Fellows Program. I decided to apply to this program because it asked more of students. You weren't allowed to just skate by with the minimum to graduate; the Paterno Fellows program demanded more--another major or minor, an internship or study abroad experience, community service, and a sound ethical mind. It took

every Liberal Arts student who craved something more and facilitated an environment where fellows don't compete against one another; they challenge one another.

This idea of challenging rather than competing was evident in my induction ceremony. I remember sitting in the auditorium with a young woman to my left and a young man to my right. The young woman had just received an internship with a U.S. Senator. The young man had just studied abroad the year prior in South Africa, conducting research and as he described, "playing with lion cubs." I can't begin to explain how humbling it was to be seated between someone working with a Senator and another individual who "played with lion cubs" in South Africa.

It's in those moments where you think back to your resume and wonder if what you have is good enough. But it is good enough! Fellows often face a unique problem. Such brilliant students surround them that there's always one who makes you feel as though you're slacking. Double majors, triple minors, individuals fluent in three languages, the list goes on and on. But what we've done as individuals and as a class is impressive, what's most impressive is that we **chose** to do the things that we've done. We didn't have to, we opted to; and in doing so we challenged ourselves to be more than just another student. And that alone speaks more wonders than any line in your CV or resume can truly express.

As this date has come closer I found myself asking, "Where has all this time gone?" I propose a challenge to my classmates, one that may seem odd at first. Look back at childhood notes, yearbooks, and photos. See what you wanted to be when you grew up. Maybe it was something unattainable like a princess or a dinosaur. But maybe it was something else; for me it was a police officer and a teacher. I've always had a dream to help communities and people even at a very young age.

I ruminate on dreams, my own and others. Often times we give up on dreams for a multitude of reasons; they seem too farfetched, we find other interests, or life gets in the way. But now we see ourselves looking into the world perhaps for the first time as adults. And with that adult vision comes the adult logic that may be more skeptical of our dreams.

In thinking about dreams, I congratulate each one of my classmates in attaining one of their dreams: graduating with an undergraduate degree and graduating as a Paterno Fellow. I imagine you originally enrolled in this program for the challenge and what the program stood for: commitment to service, leadership, and excellence set forth by our program's namesakes. Consider these important pillars to our program and ask yourself, does it end here? Does this creed end with receiving your diploma?

I should hope not and I have faith that it won't. There are many individuals who have helped us all get to where we are today--family and friends who've helped mold you into who you are, mentors who taught you along the way, alumni who donated resources to allow you to take that unpaid internship or study abroad at that country you've always dreamed of. We owe something

to them, to ourselves, and of course the Paternos for making us honorary members of their family.

What we owe them is something very simple: to remember why it is we partook in this challenge and to make them proud. Making these individuals proud has nothing to do with your salary or your job title. Instead, their pride resides in your character. Be cognizant that you are a representative of both Penn State and the Paterno Fellows Program. Remember those who made it possible for you to get here and their expectations of you as a well-rounded person.

And as equally important, remember what it is that you wanted out of life 20 years down the road at this very moment. Whatever that dream is, no matter how lofty, never forget it. Constantly stride toward those goals keeping in mind that life isn't linear.

We live in a society where increasingly, the quick easy tricks to success are often sought out. It seems as though the quicker, the easier, the better--perhaps because as a society we've become lazier, we've demanded that life become streamlined and easy when in reality, it is anything but this.

In fact, as I finished college I became aware of two things. One, I don't know nearly as much as I thought I did; and two, life is composed of ups and downs, ebbs and flows. You'll have some curveball days that just aren't fun and you'll have some days where you'll question the very nature of your work.

Don't allow those tough days to overshadow your dreams and don't allow those questions to escape you. These challenging questions will allow you to not only reflect on who you are as a person, but make improvements to your dreams as life's challenges are seen all around you.

In commenting about the difficulties in life Winston Churchill once said, "If you're going through hell, keep going." End quote. It's a simple, encouraging, yet brilliant quote. It's a quote truly about the life we may have found ourselves in the past finals week or while scrambling to submit our thesis.

Why did we put ourselves through this? We chose to do this because it was a challenge. Because we didn't want the easy way to a degree, we wanted something harder. We believed in the pillars of this program--commitment to service, leadership and excellence. We stubbornly pursued those pillars, our degrees, and our dreams with vigor often only seen in youth.

My fellow classmates: if you remember this passion in your heart that allowed you to complete this program, if you choose to make the right choice and not the easy choice, if you believe in the pillars of this program and you continue to believe in yourself and the work you want to accomplish, I assure you, you will do great things in life and you will make all of us very, very proud.

Thank you.