

**Raritan Valley Community College
Commencement Speech
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Good morning graduates, family and friends. What a beautiful day it is. Thank you Sakshi for that generous introduction. Earlier this month, I had the opportunity to attend the mentoring program ceremony here at RVCC and meet Sakshi – one of our talented students in the Sanofi mentoring program. I'm delighted that you got a chance to experience what we at Sanofi focus on doing every day – Empowering Life.

And thank you to everyone here on the platform – especially the Board of Trustees and my good friend – President Dr. Michael McDonough. When Mike's office reached out to ask me to speak today, I didn't hesitate. In addition, a special thank you to my colleague Sharon Prince, my fiancé Dell and son Ian who are all here to support me but truthfully they are here to ensure I do a good job.

I am truly honored to share in your achievement – you – the graduating class of 2019 – because today is all about you and the hard work that you have put in. Let's put our hands together for all you have achieved.

Raritan Valley Community College is an outstanding school. At the heart of it is the faculty and staff. Through my service on the foundation board, I've come to know the vision of your president and the commitment of the whole team here at RVCC...they want great things for you. They work hard each and every day to enable an exceptional higher education journey for you.

And it is humbling to stand at this podium because I am you. 28 years ago – I felt the way you feel as I was receiving my associate's degree from Hartford State Technical College. My journey started just like your journey. It was a key foundational element for me. It's where I developed roots and wings.

So let me start by sharing a little bit of my story. I bet it's not all that different from many of you. And through my story – I'll share three ideas for you to think about that may help you as you continue to write your own story.

First – let me say how much it means to me to stand here in front of you. As a Caribbean-American who grew up in Jamaica, I never imagined opportunities like this. I've always wanted to be a role model for my three children – and as I mentioned, I have my high school age son, Ian, here today to witness me giving an address like this. It's a moment for me certainly and it's a moment for him.

If you remember anything I say today, I'd like it to be these three key truths:

- Stay true to your values
- Understand what has shaped you along the way
- Be purposeful – Live your dream

Your training in life starts at home – with your parents and your family. These are the people who help to shape and guide who you ultimately become. For me, those things were growing up seeing my parents working hard – compensating for the lack of higher education. It taught me the value of hard work and I pride myself on working hard. It also taught me the value of education and the difference it can make in one's life.

So when you think about what formed who you are and what's important to you – think about where your values come from, think about what helped shape you. It matters because it's part of who you are and what makes you tick. And be sure to thank your families after today's ceremony – they have done more for you than you will ever know.

Second – understand what has shaped you along the way.

And for me, honestly, I initially had set a really low bar. I enlisted in February 1987 at 17 years old and completed basic training over the summer in San Antonio, Texas, graduating in September of that year.

This allowed me to further my education - by January of 1988 I was going to school, serving in the Air National Guard, and working at Shoprite. At that point, the influence of my family was still strong. I studied Engineering because that's what my father told me to do. One of the things that shaped me when I was in school was being around students who were much older than me – still working to get their degrees. I learned from their persistence.

I remember distinctly that a fellow night student shared with me his thinking: "I don't want to be an engineer - I want to be the engineer's boss." That struck me profoundly. It was a catalyst for me to further my education beyond my associate's degree.

I got my associate's and bachelor's degrees compliments of the US military. I continued on to get my MBA part-time while working three jobs. I also was a husband and father with a young family that I cared about a great deal. So the things I learned growing up like tenacity, like perseverance were critical. I also learned the power of networking. I'm glad I learned it as such an early point in my journey.

And that brings in the third idea I'd like to share – in addition to being true to your values and knowing what shaped you, you need to be purposeful. And that purpose isn't always about you, it can be and should be about others too.

Having served as a Commissioned Officer in the US Air Force, retiring after 21 years of service in 2008, the Air Force values became my values:

- Integrity first
- Service before self, and
- Excellence in all we do.

And I'll repeat the one that means the most to me – service before self. These values provide a foundation for leadership, decision-making, and success. For me, they translate every day to the task at hand.

With these values and with a purpose, I was able to be deliberate and intentional in my career choices, getting the experience I needed through companies like United Technologies, General Electric and BASF. I intentionally sought out opportunities to grow my business acumen in healthcare, which landed me in my current role at Sanofi.

Sanofi develops vaccines and treatments for a range of medical conditions, from the common cold to rare genetic disorders. Sanofi's focus is on Empowering Life. It's why I work there. It's personal for me – it's because we make a difference in people's lives around the world each and every day. All 104,000 of us.

I encourage you to give a great deal of thought to what you do next – be intentional about your purpose and what's behind it. One of the things I've learned on my journey is that every move doesn't have to be up – in fact many of my moves were lateral – it's often how we learn new skills.

So as you think about your journey:

- Perhaps you will continue your studies
- Perhaps you are going into the workforce
- Perhaps you are in the workforce and looking for your next move.

I encourage you to think not only about what you can get from what you do next, but what you can give. You should always be thinking about how you can give back – as a leader, as a mentor, as a human being.

The world and the times that we live in may appear to be challenging. And indeed they are. But there will always be challenges and things we can't control. It's how we respond that matters.

My kids may laugh at my musical taste – but I'll tell you that "Imagine" by John Lennon is one of my favorite songs. One of the things I always tell my kids and my teams at work - if you can dream it – you can do it. The journey can feel long and tough – but it's rewarding – stick with it, don't give up – when one door closes, find another door to open. Be relentless. Stay focused.

To quote a hero of mine, Winston Churchill: Never, Never, Never Give Up.

So as I close today – I want to remind you that we all have power – we all need to make choices – how we interact with people, how we manage our own destiny – we should never let fear be our guide.

This ending – this graduation – is really just the beginning for you. Every day is an opportunity to influence people and what they think of you. It's yours to own. It's yours to win.

So my advice:

- Work hard
- Stay true to your values
- Understand what shapes you and what drives you
- Be purposeful in your choices for yourself and for others
- Dream big – I mean really big. I know you will find what you seek
- And finally – and most important – have fun along the way

Today we recognize all of your hard work – feel good about what you have accomplished. I know you will succeed in the next phase of your journey. In the Air Force, when pilots bid farewell, they wish each other nothing but blue skies and tailwinds – and that is my wish for you.

Congratulations to you – the graduating class of Raritan Valley Community College 2019!