

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Sumter County High School

Americus, GA

June 8, 1993

Aspiring for Excellence

Mrs. Margaret Mathis (acting principal), Dr. Randy Stewart (new principal), Dr. Robin Johnson (county school superintendent), Mrs. Erma Robinson (widow of W.J.), Mr. J.C. Buchanan (chair) and other members of the Sumter County School Board, Faculty and Staff, parents, other relatives, friends of the graduates, Matthew Holloway (salutatorian), Julie Houston (valedictorian) and other members of the 1993 graduating class:

First, a word of remembrance and appreciation for your late Principal, Willie James Robinson. I don't remember when I met him but it was soon after Linda and I moved to Sumter County 25 years ago. Over the years I saw him a lot. He was always the same--open, friendly, a big smile on his face, a hearty handshake, and a positive outlook on life. He was a real asset to this community and to Sumter County High School. I miss him and I know you do, too.

He invited me to speak tonight. That was several months ago. Then, Linda and I left for a trip around the world to visit our Habitat projects in Asia and the South Pacific. When he died on March 13, we were in the Philippines and when he was buried on March 19, we were in India. We only learned of his death, though, upon our return home on March 27. I was shocked. I had been looking forward so very much to being here tonight with him. But, that was not to be. I am so pleased, however, that Mrs. Robinson is here tonight. I salute you, Mrs. Robinson, and express to you my best personal regards and warmest remembrance of Mr. Robinson. May God bless you and sustain you in the days ahead.

Now, graduates, I want to extend a warm word of congratulations to each one of you on this special, milestone, evening. High school graduation is a big deal and don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise. You've put in 13 years of hard work and hundreds of hours of study to arrive at this point in your life. You are to be commended and congratulated most highly.

You have just completed, by far, the biggest portion of your formal education. Many of you will go on to college, but that's only four years. Some will continue to get advance degrees, but that will require only two to four additional years. The combined total of the coming years of education will not surpass the

thirteen years you've already successfully put behind you. So, you're over the crest of the hill and going down the other side. Think of your future schooling that way and maybe it will be easier. You can hope anyway!

I still remember my high school graduation quite well even though it was 40 years ago this year. I graduated from Lanett, Alabama High School in 1953. That seems almost too long ago to believe, doesn't it? That was before some of your parents were born! That's how long the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

I was talking to a young woman recently. The subject of age came up and I made some comment about being old. She replied, "You're not real old. You're just old!"

You graduates are not real young anymore. You're just young. But, you've arrived at a major intersection in life. You are entering the adult world and, even though you are still close to home and will remain in close touch for a long time to come, things will be different in many ways after tonight.

As you face your future, I want to share some thoughts which hopefully will be helpful to you as the years go by.

First, is attitude.

-One of my high school teachers talked about attitude.

-We all have different life experiences. Many good things have happened to me over the years, but there have been problems.

-My mother died when I was three. My dad remarried and I had difficulty getting along with my stepmother.

-In first grade, a fellow student pushed me off the see-saw and broke my arm.

-I wrecked my bicycle and had a brain concussion.

-I played football in high school. During practice one day, the whole team piled on my head and broke my nose. In another practice, my collarbone was broken.

-I ran for president of the student body at Auburn University and lost.

-I made a "D" in French and flunked calculus in college.

And, this is only a small portion of the list of the bad stuff!

Each one of you graduates here tonight has had good experiences and bad ones in life and you will continue to have both good and bad experiences in the years ahead.

The question is: What will your attitude be about these setbacks or disappointments in life?

Last summer Linda and I visited Alaska. In a remote lodge at Glacier Bay at the north end of the panhandle of Alaska I read these words on a plaque on the wall:

One ship drives east and another drives west
With the selfsame winds that blow.
'Tis the set of the sails and not the gales
Which tells us the way to go.
"Like the winds of the sea are the ways of fate,
As we voyage along through life;
'Tis the set of a soul that decides its goal
And not the calm or the strife."

That poem is about attitude. Every cup that is half empty is also half full. A problem to one person is an opportunity in disguise to another. It all depends on one's attitude.

So, what is my advice? Think positive. Count your blessings. Name them one by one. If life gives you a lemon, make lemonade.

I've heard people talk negatively about Americus and Sumter County, and about our schools. But, think about it. This town and county have produced an Attorney General of the United States, a Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senator, a Chief Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, a President of the United States, a Christian community, Koinonia Farm, and Habitat for Humanity which are known internationally, business enterprises and business people who are nationally known, and athletes, coaches, religious leaders and educators who are also well known all across the land. You can be justly proud of your town, your county and your school!

But, it's all attitude. You can do poorly in your future endeavors and blame it on something "back home", but you will be the loser. Decide now to be a winner.

Have an attitude of seeking opportunities. Keep your ears open for them. When opportunities knock, open the door quickly. Furthermore, when you fail at something in the years ahead, like a tackled halfback, get up as quickly as you can, dust yourself off, and try again.

Maintain an attitude of serving others. Don't be a taker and a leech on society. Seek ways to give to others not expecting anything in return. That is a healthy attitude. And, it will enhance your own life and bless the lives of countless others.

When Clarence Jordan and I first started talking about building houses for low-income families out at Koinonia Farm over 20 years ago, our heart's desire was to be of help to someone. When our family decided to move to Africa in 1973, we had an attitude of wanting to help poor people in Zaire have simple, but good and decent, houses for their families. And, when we returned to Sumter County seventeen years ago and officially organized Habitat for Humanity, our sole motivation was to create an organization that would make a positive difference in the lives of people who needed adequate housing on terms they could afford to pay.

The work of Habitat has now expanded to over forty nations. We are building houses in more than a thousand towns and cities in those countries. The 20,000th house was completed here in Americus during Holy Week in April as a part of the 20/20,000 Project. More than a thousand additional houses have been built since that April blitz build because we are building an average of 22 houses every day now! And, as you know, through the Sumter County Initiative, we plan to completely eliminate all substandard housing in Americus and Sumter County by the end of the decade. The youth are helping and especially on the Youth House which is being built this summer at the 20/20,000 site in Americus. Sumter County High is well represented. Amy Hall is Co-Chairperson of the entire operation. Christy Mills is Secretary and LaKinia Watts is Chairperson of the Public Relations Committee. Many other students from Sumter County High are helping and that help is deeply appreciated.

Thousands of other students all across the land, and even in other countries, have organized nearly 300 Campus Chapters of Habitat for Humanity at colleges, universities and high schools. These dedicated students are raising hundreds of thousands of dollars and doing "hands on" work in building houses for needy families in hundreds of towns and cities.

So, many good things result from a motivation and an attitude of service. And, the positive things are not just limited to houses. Habitat for Humanity has become a major employer in Americus, with over 200 people at our headquarters. We've outgrown our existing headquarters building and are currently renovating the Rylander Building in downtown Americus to enable us to accommodate our expanding staff.

Habitat for Humanity is now in excess of a hundred million dollar a year operation, with over \$35 million a year flowing to, and through, Americus. Within three years, Habitat should be the largest home builder in the country. By the end of this decade, we expect to be a \$1 billion operation with local Habitat groups building houses in well over 2,000 locations in sixty countries.

We have over a million people on our mailing list and that number increases by 17,000 every month.

You might ask, "With such a growing worldwide operation, why are you staying in Americus?"

There are three compelling reasons. First, we like Americus and Sumter County. We think this is a great place to live. The quality of life is good here. The County is beautiful and the people are friendly, industrious and intelligent. Second, we can operate here for a fraction of what it would cost to operate in a larger city such as Atlanta, New York, or Chicago. And, third, the communications revolution has made it possible for us to be as connected to the world as we would be in the center of the largest city in the country. The only negative is that we are some distance from a major airport, but that's not all that much of a problem.

Consider the technical side of the operation. Habitat has 160 telephone sets of which 90 are high tech multi-featured digital units. We have our own digital link to the MCI center in Albany which bypasses Southern Bell lines for most long distance traffic. Digital service gives increased accuracy and clarity which is especially important for data transmission.

On a typical day we receive an average of 800 to a thousand long distance calls. We make 300 outgoing long distance calls. We send 60 documents by fax.

We have 45 separate telephone lines. Twenty-four of these are for normal voice service, and pass through our switchboard and auto attendant system. The remaining twenty-one are direct lines for data transmission, fax services, and special communication purposes such as remote locations overseas.

In any given month, we talk to people in all 50 States and over 40 foreign countries.

Habitat for Humanity is the largest single user of telephone services in Sumter County.

Our computer "brain" at Habitat is a DEC VAX 4500. It weighs only 100 pounds and is smaller than a two drawer legal filing cabinet. We installed this computer in February 1992. It replaced a computer VAX 6410 which weighed 1,000 pounds and was over 3 times the size of the current one. But, this new one is 3 times faster than the 6410.

We process over a million transactions each year and that number will quadruple before the year 2000. There are 25 computer professionals on our staff here in Americus.

I share in some detail with you about the technical set-up of our headquarters not only because I thought you'd find the information interesting but, more importantly, because, more than ever before in history, you will need to be literate about computers and other technology to cope with your future. In short, you should have an attitude of learning how to successfully deal with the growing technological revolution. Consider the following from an article in the May issue of Nation's Business Magazine: "The next generation of technology will make current telecommunications look as awkward as the crank telephone of 1910...Up to now, the kind of information transmitted required particular devices for that kind of information. Voice messages go by analog signal over copper wires to telephones. Television and radio signals are broadcast via air or cable to sets in homes--not to telephones. Radio waves are picked up by radios, television signals by televisions. Computers receive data by disk or by telephone and radio modem--waiting in line like any other traffic on the shared lines.

"All of that will change. Digitizing information, which will become the standard way information is converted for the purpose of transmission, means that anything can be delivered to any instrument capable of displaying it.

"When information is digitized, any device can become a 'receiver' for it, as long as it is capable of the appropriate display: A TV can receive and display computer text, a radio can receive a phone call, and so on...

"Most telecommunications observers envision a worldwide linking of information networks. New devices, called personal communicators or personal digital assistants, will be able to tap into those networks anywhere in the world. They will recognize your handwriting, send and receive faxes, and even include a

telephone. The telephone will become smaller and more powerful, and its functions will begin to merge with computers.

"Television will become interactive, a window into all that has ever been written, painted, or filmed, anytime you want it."

The article goes on to say that for all of the above to become possible, some tough problems must be solved. Software must be written. Some bright person has to build an "information highway" to handle the traffic. Someone must establish standards that will allow all of the equipment to cooperate.

Perhaps the person or persons to do all this is in this class. You'll have to get a lot more education and you'll have to be determined, dedicated and willing to do a lot of hard work, but the challenge is certainly exciting.

Whatever you do in life, try to do it well. When you enter college or technical school, seek to be the best student possible. If you get a job, try to be the best employee in the company. When you get married, as most of you will, or already are, strive to be the best husband or wife possible and, when children come along, attempt to be the best parent ever.

Aspire for excellence in all your endeavors. And, develop good habits. Do you smoke? If so, quit. Do you abuse alcohol or drugs? If so, stop. If you don't have these bad habits, don't acquire them. Don't waste time. Life is too short and too precious to squander a single day. Try to do good, worthwhile, things repeatedly. Aristotle once said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."

Don't ever waste your talents. They are God given, but you can develop or squander them.

Discipline is necessary for a useful, productive, life. If you can't learn to control your own self, how can you ever be a positive influence on others.

Don't limit yourself. To me, a successful person is one who is realizing his or her full potential in life. We are all different. Our abilities are different, but each person can come to know who they are, what their real interests and abilities are and those interests can be pursued and those abilities can be enhanced in order to rise to the highest level of achievement that is possible for that person.

When problems come along in life, as they surely will, don't fight the problems; solve them. I learned that basic, elemental, bit of wisdom from a Religious Emphasis Week speaker at Auburn University when I

was a student there. Think about that. Too many people fight their problems, and, very often, the problems win. Currently, we, as a society, are fighting several big problems. For example, we have a "war on drugs" and we are "fighting crime". And, what are the results? Crime, especially violent crime, continues to be of epidemic proportions and drugs are everywhere. We have over a million people in jail and we kill more and more people by electrocution, hanging, lethal injection or gas chambers than ever before. This fighting the problem isn't working. The problems need to be solved and they can be with a change of attitude. Your generation now has the challenge to solve the above mentioned problems and a multitude of others of equal severity.

One problem which stands high on any thinking person's list of priorities is the very serious problem of the environment. The United Nations Center for Human Settlements recently issued this statement, "Increasingly, it is felt that, unless we change our course of development and our extravagant lifestyles, the Earth will no longer be able to provide humanity with sustenance and shelter. Future generations will inherit a blighted planet."

In Habitat for Humanity, we have set up a department of the environment and are currently searching for a director. We intend, as an organization, to be a good environmental citizen, making sure that our building activity does not damage the environment. Among other things, we are making sure we plant back enough trees to replace those cut to build Habitat houses.

Individually, all of us must constantly strive to preserve the Earth. As the Bible says, the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. We must be good stewards of God's Earth and insure that it is protected for future generations. Right now, we are doing a lousy job. The evidence is everywhere, from trash on the streets right here in Americus and Sumter County, to slum housing, to overflowing landfills, to a growing hole in the Ozone layer, to the blazing forests of the world that are going up in smoke at an alarming rate and an exploding population which adds 95 million people, more than the population of Mexico, to the world every year.

Well, I hope these thoughts are helpful to you in some way. I've talked about attitude, striving for excellence, good work and personal habits, discipline, a problem solving orientation in life, the growing

importance of technology in our society and the importance of service to others. So much more could be said, but I will conclude now with a parting thought.

In a world of great change and unprecedented challenge, some things remain the same. Friendship. Family. A brilliant sunset. A full moon. A love song. A lovely poem. A beautiful picture or a letter of encouragement. Faith. Hope. Love. All of these things and other values we hold dear remain unchanged, whether experienced in person, over the phone, by fax, or through some other new fangled technology.

God bless all of you in the years ahead and, again, congratulations on your graduation.