



# Commencement Speech for Waynesboro Class of '07

June 10, 2007 By [Shawn Decker](#)

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Yesterday I was the commencement speaker for Waynesboro High School's graduation ceremony. No joke! I'll write more about the experience later. Enjoy the speech below, and all the best to the Class of 2007.

Positively Yours,  
Shawn

"Good morning. It is truly an honor to be a part of this event, but I have to admit I was a bit surprised when I got the call from Principal Wright.

You see, I wasn't exactly the best student to ever grace those hallways: my attendance record was horrible. I had trouble paying attention in class. You could say I wasn't academically motivated and maybe a few of you can relate to that. Although I did the bare minimum to get by, I suspect that my teachers passed me along because they had sympathy for me. I was the kid who was diagnosed with HIV at age 11. Consequently, a lot of my teachers overlooked my shortcomings as a student, because many didn't expect me to make it to adulthood, let alone go to college. So when I was invited to be the commencement speaker, I was really excited until I thought, "Maybe they want to make me re-take all of my classes, and actually earn that diploma?"

Either way, I'm happy to be here on so many levels. On the most basic, I made it to adulthood. Pat yourselves on the back, because you made it, too. And each of you have followed your own paths to get here.

For some, academics have come naturally. For others, it took the gentle and sometimes not-so-gentle prodding of friends, family and teachers to get you here. Some of you finished lunch early in order to have more time to perfect an assignment, while some of you finished lunch early and snuck out to smoke a cigarette. Whatever road you traveled, I am sure that the road has not been easy. Each one of you has had to overcome your own obstacles, and today represents a unique moment in your life, a simultaneously happy and somber occasion. It is the rarest of moments.

This is a family of sorts. You've had your disagreements, and you've had your triumphs. Some of

you have literally grown up together, and it's pretty heavy to think that this this very moment is the last time that you will all be together. Take a second to think about this. And enjoy it... and if someone owes you some money, be sure that they pay up, because they won't be good for it at the 10 year reunion.

Thomas Jefferson once said:

"..friendship is precious, not only in the shade, but in the sunshine of life, and thanks to a benevolent arrangement the greater part of life is sunshine."

An inescapable part of living is facing the challenges that life throws our way. Some of mine have been medical which started when I was born with hemophilia. But my biggest obstacle occurred twenty years ago I was diagnosed with HIV. Back then, there were no treatments for HIV/AIDS, and I did my best to ignore what I determined to be my greatest flaw. Basically, I treated HIV like a zit.

Of course, I was scared of what lay ahead. Many in the community were concerned as well, so much that I was asked to leave school in the sixth grade due to fears that I would transmit the virus to other students. Thankfully, things calmed down once people learned that HIV could not be spread through hugs, sharing pencils or shooting spitballs. And, even with HIV involved, the biggest threat a wedgie posed was a pair of ripped underwear and a bruised ego.

When I returned to school for the 7th grade, I wasn't too worried about studying. Instead, I focused on the most important things in life: perfecting my video game skills and working up the courage to talk to girls. I wasn't sure what was in store for me healthwise, so I planned to enjoy the rest of my life, however long or short it may be.

By the time I got to Waynesboro High School, I wasn't much different from some of you. As a freshman I joined a garage band with my friends. My sophomore year I fell in love for the first time. And as a junior, I learned to laugh at myself as much as I'd laughed at others before. I mean, my initials are STD, for God's sake.

But it was during my senior year that I got the shock of a lifetime: my classmates crowned me Homecoming King on this field, and my friends carried me around the field. I was the star quarterback without getting sweaty or tackled: perfect for a wimpy hemophiliac such as myself.

The shock of my parents' lifetime was getting to see me graduate fourteen years ago. I sat there in my purple robe, an incredible personal achievement not because I'd studied hard, but simply because I'd lived to see the day.

When I sat there, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I couldn't think of anything to study in college, and no occupation seemed worthy of my undivided attention. So I coasted along, until I did the one thing I never thought I would or could do: I decided to speak about living with HIV.

This decision changed my life and, surprisingly, it came without warning. By opening up, I

discovered my love for writing, and that I enjoyed public speaking. Five years after graduating I was invited to the White House, where I met then Vice President Al Gore, a bitter and painful reminder that I'd lost the Waynesboro High School election of '92. Stunning defeats aside, Thomas Jefferson was right, the greater part of life is sunshine. And life has many sunrises, sunsets and surprises in store. You may soon find that your greatest perceived obstacle is in fact your greatest strength.

You might be worried that you do not have all of the answers that you thought you would on graduation day, and that is OK because the absolute truth is that we will never have all the answers. That's part of the fun, it keeps us curious and prevents our minds from turning into slush.

Perhaps you have everything planned out, and know what the next seven steps of your life will be. My only advice? Don't be afraid to change things up if your heart and mind begin to nudge you in other directions. When your heart and mind team up, it's usually best to just go along with them and see what happens.

No one is guaranteed a finite amount of years to live, and I'm not sure if we get more than one go at this life. I've tried to make the most of my time, and my hope for all of you is that you do the same. Embrace what makes you different, it's why your friends love you. Embrace what makes them different from you, because that's the one thing that unifies all of us.

Everything that has happened before now is unchangeable, do not think of those events as good or bad. Think of them as what they undoubtedly are: experiences that have made you who you are today.

Be confident in who you are right now: the you of the past will be your biggest fan, and the you of the future you is already laughing at what past you wore earlier this week.

My time here is winding down.. meaning this speech, not MY TIME. I genuinely hope that some of my words this morning have inspired you, and that the best accomplishments of your life are just around the corner.

I will always be grateful to have been a part of this shared moment. And maybe in four years, after I've re-graduated from this fine school, one of you will come back and be my commencement speaker. I'm going to do my damndest to be the Class President who introduces you, so wish me luck.

As for you? Well, I say that, as you walk into the future, you all should join hands, go out there, sneak up on the world and give the world a huge wedgie... just to let it know that the Class of 2007 has arrived."