

Written and delivered by: Steven Conine '91 - Commencement 6/6/2021

Thanks Fr. Michael, I really appreciate being here. This is the first time I've spoken to a live audience in over 15 months, it's a comfort not having to worry if I'm on mute. It's the first time I've talked in public with a ponytail and it's the first time I've given a speech with a largely prepared script in a long time. The good news for all of you on that front is you're much more assured that I won't ramble on too long.

So let me first say I'm very honored and humbled to be here. We're surrounded by amazing teachers and coaches who have been investing in all of you for the past 4 or more years. If you're like me you'll look back some day and realize they have had a significant impact on who you have become. My hope is I might have just a tiny fraction of that impact.

I've found a lot of success taking a long view in life but when I graduated from Delbarton, 30 years ago, I would have never thought that some day I would be the commencement speaker. When I was at Delbarton I was more interested in fixing Fr. Gerard's rolling desk than working on English homework. Many free times were spent exploring in the woods around Trinity hall. I found acting fun but really enjoyed building the sets and running the lighting. During baseball practice I found it more interesting to sit on the bench and take the balls apart. I've always been curious and Delbarton was an environment that really nurtured that curiosity. This curiosity ultimately led me to a career in entrepreneurship. I have started 3 companies in my career. The most recent one, Wayfair, we started in my kids nursery. It is now on the Fortune 500 (217 as of this week which I am very proud of our Wayfair team for) The path to this point is not one I would have guessed when I was here 30 years ago. I'd like to share 3 stories about me then and offer some reflections on how they have shaped the person I am today.

The first story I'd like to tell is about working around our house in New Vernon. My mother was one of 10 kids raised on a vegetable farm in upstate NY where everyone was expected to pitch in. So her expectations of us in suburban NJ were no different. If you've ever driven through New Vernon you might have noticed the long white picket fence across from the Presbyterian church. My brother and I built that when I was in 7th grade (yes that probably also explains

why it's not that straight, serves my mom right for using child labor, might also explain why I got a D in Latin that year, I was busy building a fence). As a kid we were blissfully unaware of what we were embarking on. We spent countless weekends nailing, assembling and painting, by the time we were done with what must be like 100 sections we were real fencing pros. My reflection on this story is that we all face long hard challenges as we go through life. It's good to take a long view but as you tackle those challenges take it one section at a time, improve as you go and you'll eventually be a pro.

In the same vein I'm fascinated by calculating the time people spend doing small things. For example we currently employ over 15k people at Wayfair, many have to take an elevator to get into our office. If I assume 10k people are on an elevator 2 minutes/day then I'm effectively employing 44 to do nothing but ride an elevator for their career. Small things add up, always be looking for ways to improve.

The next story I've got is about jobs I had when I was your age. While I was at Delbarton my father worked at Merrill Lynch. He got me an internship with Merrill for a couple of summers so I got to wear a suit every day, answer phones, do filing and build Excel spreadsheets. It felt like an important job at the time. My mother during that time started a retail store down on Rt 202 called the Garden Cottage, by the way my sister still runs. I was shopping there yesterday. They have great products, maybe check it out after this :), I also worked there. Similar to experiences I'd had working on a vegetable farm, this work was dramatically different from the banking experience. I used to do a lot of deliveries in this area. I imagine some of your grandparents would probably find it funny to think that the founder of Wayfair might have delivered their concrete patio set back in the 90's. When I was young I thought working in money management might be the career for me, but having tried it I found I was equally as happy delivering concrete patio sets, this opened my mind to alternative options. My reflection on this story is simple, try different jobs while you are young. In my case entrepreneurship was not generally considered a career when I was a kid. It was a path I discovered was right for me by wandering down a bunch of wrong paths. The universe will push you to be average and follow the beaten path. It will feel like the safe and more comfortable choice. If you only follow the beaten path you might never get lost but you'll also never find shortcuts to things you love.

The last story I've got is about religion. One odd thing about me and Delbarton is that I was raised Presbyterian, so I fell into the non-catholic group at Delbarton, I know you're probably thinking "well that explains why he had so much time to be wandering around in the woods". There's some truth to that, I have no idea if they still have the same generous study hall program for non-catholics, cause boy they sure did when I was here. Going back to my story, when I say I was raised Presbyterian I'm using "raised" generously, as a kid I would have probably have said I was forced. I have always been questioning of religion and being raised presbyterian and spending 6 years at Catholic school certainly exposed me to religion in a big way. As I've gotten older two interesting things have happened with me and religion: 1st, I've come to really appreciate that I have strong core values. I have religion to thank for this. To this day I fundamentally live by the values the religions I was exposed to layed out for me. The years I spent at Delbarton among people who lived and practiced the same were critical to my developing strong core values. 2nd, questioning and curiosity are good, they are how we learn and strong religions invite it. My reflection on this is that it is healthy to question your opinions, debate your beliefs, search for deeper truths, explore that sloppy boundary between science and faith, always be willing to re-evaluate your opinions - but have strong core values. You only learn when something goes differently from what you expected. Be humble, truly the more you know the more you understand how much you don't know.

I know it's been said a lot, but you guys have had the most interesting senior year in decades. I know I'm standing between you and what will hopefully be a great summer and a great life ahead. So as you get ready to head off to the summer and college and beyond I'll leave you with this: I have a good friend in Boston who recently told me something profound, the more they have studied what creates happiness the more they pin it to two main things: Get a good night's sleep and have gratitude. As a start I am sure you all feel grateful for the amazing education and experience you've gotten here, and if you improve every day, stay curious, follow your dreams, have strong core values, (and get some good sleep) you will be successful and have a major impact on the world. Congratulations Class of 2021