

## Webb School Speech-11/11/22

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you here today. It's always special to return to Bell Buckle, and to my alma mater, Webb School, and especially important to be here for this important day where the Seniors receive their Senior Blazers. It's a true honor, and I am grateful.

I'm not here to give you some sappy alumni stories about how things used to be, or how I walk down memory lane every time I step on this campus. Don't get me wrong, I like nostalgia as much as anyone else, but that's not what today is about. Today is about "the next step." The next step for you, for me, for all of us.

Ironically, I was supposed to speak to you all, at this very occasion, on November 12, 2021, but, a little more than a year ago...377 days to be exact, I was driving home from a wedding shower for my niece in Smithville, and a driver fell asleep, crossing the double yellow line and hitting me head on. I still remember it vividly, the other car's headlights right in my face just before impact. All of the safety features in my car worked perfectly. (I was in a 2016 Toyota Avalon by the way. I highly recommend them.) But I was severely injured, and so was the other driver. Thankfully, we both survived, but I had a broken vertebrae in my neck, multiple broken ribs, a broken sternum, a broken collar bone, a broken heel, from where I was pressing on the brakes, and most concerning, internal bleeding. I was rushed to Cookeville Regional Hospital, and then to Vanderbilt, where I spent the next 15 days. To make matters worse, my wife was in the car just behind me, and saw the whole thing happen. I am thankful she wasn't in front of me, but I know her trauma has been very difficult as well. I was able to come home on November 15, but I was in a neck brace, that I would wear for 6 weeks, and I had a cast on my foot, and not be able to bear weight for 3 months. I literally couldn't walk, couldn't bathe myself, couldn't care for myself. During this time of recovery, I had plenty of time to think about "my next step." Literally, I had to learn how to take steps again, but also, what would be the next steps in my life. We all know that traumatic events make us reflect on our lives, and cause us to consider what we are doing and why we are doing it. It shouldn't take a head-on car crash to do it, but that seems to be how it works.

So, let me jump to the end of my story and tell you that, no, I haven't taken some drastic steps to change who I am or found some epiphany of life. You see, that's the point, our "next steps" can be big, life-altering decisions in response to some major event in your life, or our next steps can be putting one foot in front of the other, doing ordinary things in our own extraordinary way.

Also, being that today is Sawney Webb's 180<sup>th</sup> birthday...yes...180...I think it's important to reflect on his life and many of the "next step" moments he had to take. I think about the day in 1886 when the town of Culleoka legalized the sale of liquor and Sawney was faced with a decision. What were his "next steps?" Would he continue his school in Culleoka or move? Where would he go? What new challenges awaited him and his students? We know the story. His next step was to

move to Bell Buckle, and as they say, the rest is history. I also think about when Sawney was elected to serve as US Senator to serve out the remainder of the term of Robert Love Taylor. It was only for a month, but can you imagine the situation? A man born and raised in North Carolina, served in the Confederate Army, moved to TN, started a boarding school in Culleoka, moved it to Bell Buckle, was going to Washington DC to serve his State and Country. I can imagine it being totally awesome, yet completely overwhelming. But he took it one step at a time, representing his citizens, and then returning to lead his school. We honor him and his legacy through our actions and through events like today. Happy Birthday Sawney!

Today is also Veteran's Day, and we should take a moment to honor and recognize the sacrifices, and victories, of the men and women (and their families) who served in our Armed Forces. Think about the "next steps" many of them had to make. Whether it was in active combat in a foreign country, or a training mission here at home, every step mattered. One wrong step could put you, your fellow troops, your country in danger. I think of my friend Warren Wells, who served in the TN National Guard and went to Iraq back in the early 2000's. Warren graduated from Cascade just down the road here. While in Iraq, Warren was severely injured by an IED. When they were picking shrapnel out of his leg, I am sure he was thinking, "Will I be able to walk again, and what are my next steps in life?" Warren recovered, has a beautiful wife, 2 kids, had a successful career working for Gov. Bill Haslam, and is now the CEO of the Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration in Shelbyville. It's veterans like Warren that make me proud to be an American and a great example of taking things one step at a time.

So that brings us to today, the Senior Class at the Webb School. They will be taking their "next step" today, by receiving their Senior Blazers. But what about tomorrow? What steps are you going to take? And what are your next steps after Webb? These are probably some of those big, life altering decisions I was talking about earlier. But let me suggest to you, don't overthink it. Take things one step at a time. Today represents a significant milestone in your journey towards graduation. Enjoy it. I'm honored to share in this important event. So, without further delay, I am going to turn the program over to Dr. Sullens. Congratulations!