



2024 Commencement Speech: Mr. James Carlton Showalter

Introduction by Selene Zhao, Salutatorian: *Mr. James Carlton Showalter, Jr., who goes by “Carl,” graduated from Savannah Country Day School in 1978. While a student here, he was Captain of the Football and Basketball Teams and received the Creed Reagan Award. He attended the Virginia Military Institute on a football scholarship and graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Civil Engineering. He is currently president of Showalter Construction Company, a commercial sitework contractor he founded in 1986 in Charlotte, North Carolina. In addition to running his company, Mr. Showalter is also an active member of the Charlotte community: he served for 14 years on the Board of Trustees at Charlotte Country Day School and is a former Chair of the YMCA Camp Thunderbird Board. Currently, he serves as the Board Chairman for the Central Piedmont Community College Foundation, is a member of the Executive Committee of the University of North Carolina Health Foundation, serves on the Board of the Charlotte Ballet, and is a member of the Christ Episcopal Church Vestry. He is a Master Mason, York and Scottish Rite Member, and Shriner. He and his wife Jane have three sons, Vic, Ward, and Pete.*

Carl Showalter '78 Commencement Address:

Thank you very much for that kind introduction. Headmaster Wilson, Chairman of the Board Beaver, Faculty and Staff, Family and Friends, Members of the Class of 2024. I am honored, humbled, and grateful to stand before you this evening. I think it was Dale Carnegie, the famous writer and lecturer who once said that there are three types of speeches...the one you practiced, the one you gave, and one you wish you had given. Let's hope I land the plane somewhere!

It was 51 years ago that I set foot on this campus as a 12-year-old rising 8th grader. You all are probably wondering...who is this guy and why is he our commencement speaker. Believe me, you are not alone. I want to share a funny story about one of the many iconic teachers and coaches that I had here as a student. This one is about Mrs. Beulah Harper, who passed away in 2015. I know she is looking down on us this evening and wondering, “How in the world did Showalter get invited to speak at commencement?” Mrs. Harper was Chair of the English Department, and her charge was to prepare us for the SAT Exam in our junior year. She was tough as nails, a drill sergeant. She was firm but fair, and she possessed a wicked sense of humor. She loved to call the boys in her class by their last names. I can recall sitting in the library my senior year, filling out an application to go to Davidson College. They were recruiting me to play football. She walked by and asked, Showalter, what you doin'. I said oh, Mrs. Harper, I am filling out this application to go to Davidson. She said, don't you know, they only let smart boys in Davidson. I know she is having one big belly laugh seeing me up here. Mrs. Harper, I will try to make you proud.

I am the oldest of 4 boys. I came from a working-class family; my father was in sales, and my mother worked the night shift at a local mental health facility in administration. My parents met their freshman year in college at Armstrong, married, and started a family right away. They never went back to finish. My brothers and I played football, basketball, and baseball...rode our bikes and played in the creeks and woods growing up. I attended seven different public schools, kindergarten through 7th grade. I guess we moved around a lot.

How I arrived on campus in the summer of 1973 is kind of interesting. My youth basketball coach, Coach Miller was approached by Mr. Bill Saunders, who at the time was the Business Manager, Athletic Director, Head Football, and Head Basketball Coach. Mr. Saunders shared with my coach that the school had some very generous financial aid packages for kids who might benefit from a Country Day Education and Experience but could not afford the cost to attend. Coach Miller rolled out this opportunity to me and a few of my teammates. I was the only one that decided to give it a shot. Although I think my initial reaction was, “I don't want to go to a private school,” my parents insisted that we at least check it out. We toured campus in the spring of my 7th grade year. We met with teachers, visited the classrooms, and finished with a tour of the athletic fields and facilities. I had never seen so much lush green grass in my life. A tennis match was going on, Spring Football practice was in full swing, and students were running around the track—pretty impressive.

I took an entrance exam to see where I stood academically and if I was capable of doing the work at grade level. The results were that I was average at best. For those of you in the audience, you may have heard of the great Hall of Fame baseball pitcher Sachel Paige, who once said, “No man can avoid being born average, but no man has to stay average.” It is a choice.

This school changed the trajectory of my life in so many ways. On the first day of 8th grade, I met the prettiest and nicest girl in our grade. She went on to be the Homecoming Queen, Captain of the Cheerleaders, and graduated from Vanderbilt University. She also became my wife, and we will have been married 41 years in June. Best thing that ever happened to me. She is still pretty and sweet and is here tonight supporting me like she has done all these years. Janie, would you please stand. Also joining me tonight is my youngest son Pete and his fiancée Alyssa. Thanks, guys for being here.

My point is that all of us are the sum of our experiences and our surroundings. We are the products of our influences and environments, our family and our friends. The thought of us making it on our own is a myth. Class of 2024, you have accomplished much, but you did not do it alone. My hope is that after this evening, you will thank your parents for giving you the opportunity to attend this school and also thank your teachers and coaches for all their hard work and dedication in helping you achieve your goals and aspirations. So much of who I am today was a direct result of the coaches and teachers that I had as a student here at Country Day. Coach Kirkley and Mr. Bill Saunders. The two of them had as much impact on my life as my own father. Thank you, Coach Kirkley, for being a great mentor and role model for me over the past 50 years. You taught me more than how to box out and get a rebound, you taught me many life lessons. Mr. Saunders fulfilled a promise to my parents that I would go to college and graduate. I attended the Virginia Military Institute on a Football Scholarship and graduated with a degree in Civil Engineering. They both saw that I had some potential.

Understand, everyone has hidden potential. What you do with that potential is the important thing. There is this widely held belief that greatness is born, not made. Tonight, we will celebrate the outstanding students, the natural athletes, the gifted musicians, and the creative artists. That being said, I am here to share with you and have found over the years that there are ten habits that can be acquired and skills you can learn that require zero talent and can make all the difference in the world and maximize your potential and help you achieve greatness.

These 10 habits are as follows:

1. Being on time

We like to say that if you are 5 minutes early, you are on time. If you are on time, you are late. Being on time speaks volumes about character. Always be more concerned about your character than your reputation. Character is what you are, reputation is what people think you are. Be on time for class. It sends a clear message to your professors that you understand and value his or her time and you are there ready and eager to learn. 99% of success is just showing up.

2. Work Ethic

Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard. Persevere, persevere, persevere. Do not quit. I repeat, do not quit. Your professors will be looking for consistent effort. Give it to them. Always be the hardest worker in the class. Commit yourself to quality.

3. Effort

“You can’t shoot the Moose sittin’ in the Lodge—it takes effort. It is a state of mind and behavior. Always invest your mind and spirit fully in your work. Don’t wait for things to happen, make it happen. This Fall, there will be parties thrown during the week, and you will go, and you will have a large time. You will also have a scheduled 8 am class the next morning. Make the effort and be on time for that class. Sometimes you have to play hurt!!!

4. Energy

Your parents will agree with me on this one: nothing good happens after midnight. “You can’t soar with the Eagles, when you hoot with the Owls.” Make it a priority to get plenty of sleep, exercise, and eat right. I encourage you to get up early, it’s the best part of the day. Remember, early to bed, and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.

5. Body Language

How you walk, your facial expressions, and what you say and do in the most innocent situations will speak volumes about who you truly are. Your professors will focus on your body language to see if it coincides with what is coming out of your mouth. Use your manners: yes ma’am, no ma’am, yes sir, no sir, please, and thank you. Do not discount the power of a handwritten thank you note—it shows respect, and good manners will always go a long way.

6. Attitude

Might be the most important habit of all. Attitude is simply the way you respond to a situation, not the situation itself. When you have a positive attitude, you not only enhance your own efforts but also make life better for those around you. Once you graduate, you will be graded on your attitude. It is all about enthusiasm. When our company is looking to hire someone, we focus more on their attitude than what they know how to do. We can teach that. We want folks who get excited about work and believe in our culture and what we do.

7. Passion

Passionate people are just plain fun to be around. Showing a high level of excitement for things automatically makes for a great impression, and we all know that you only have one chance to make a first impression. As you begin the next chapter in your lives searching for passion and purpose, I encourage all of you to take chances, explore, and try new things. You will regret the things you didn’t do more than the things you did.

8. Being Coachable

Every day is a School Day. You are always going to have to learn new stuff and adapt. Learn from the feedback from others. Become a better listener. We were given two ears and one mouth for a reason. It was Abraham Lincoln who said, “It is better to be quiet and thought a fool than to speak out and leave no doubt.” Always be on the lookout for ways to improve and learn new things about yourself. You will have an occasional hiccup. You might even make a D or flunk a course in college like I did. “Don’t play the last play, play the next play.” Get over it, learn from it, and move on.

9. Doing extra

Give people more than they expect and do it cheerfully. Any opportunity to earn extra credit in your classes, do it. Go the extra mile consistently. Never underestimate your ability to do more. This Fall, you will be juggling lots of balls: academics, social life, fraternities, sororities, intercollegiate athletics, and extra-curricular activities. One of those balls will be the gold ball (academics), never take your eye off it.

10. Finally, Be Prepared

Do your homework. Ties in with work ethic. Recognize that the harder you work and the better prepared you are, the better chance that great things will come your way. If you want to enjoy the rainbow, you better be prepared to weather the storm.

My parting advice is this: life is all about choices, even more now as you graduate. I made a choice in seventh grade that changed my life forever. Find your purpose. While I was a cadet at VMI, every day that I walked into Barracks, there was a quote on a wall from a famous general, and it read, “you may be whatever you resolve to be.” It is my favorite. Get involved with your community, make connections, and volunteer. Be generous. Give back and pay it forward. Who knows, you might even help someone like me attend this school and change their life forever.. Take good care of those you love. And lastly, don’t do anything that wouldn’t make your Mom Proud.

Class of 2024. Congratulations again, it has truly been a privilege to celebrate with you this evening. I won the lottery when I got the chance of a lifetime to come to this school, AND SO DID YOU! I am forever grateful.

Thank you very much. GO HORNETS!!!