

College of Public Health and Health Professions Convocation
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida
May 3, 2013

Good morning. Thank you so much for that wonderful introduction. Thank you to Dean Perri and to Dr. Mary Peoples-Sheps for the invitation to be here with you today. Congratulations to all of the honorees and graduates on a job very well done. I know that your families, friends and colleagues are proud of you and you should be proud of yourselves.

You heard in my introduction that I went to public health school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Yes, I am a Tar Heel. But today we celebrate because we are all part of the public health and health professions family. Thank you for welcoming me to the University of Florida.

For just a few minutes, I want to talk about four P's.

The first "P" stands for **purpose**. When you were growing up, I am sure people asked you, what do you want to be when you grow up? I know I was asked that questions many times. It was through my volunteer work as a candy striper while still in high school, that I began to seriously consider my answer to that persistent question. While volunteering at the Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, I had the opportunity to interact with many health professionals. I considered becoming an occupational or physical therapist but later decided to pursue nursing as a career. And with that decision, I thought I had found my purpose in life. However, during the basic science years and rotations on various wards – medicine, surgery, pediatrics and maternity, I became less and less enamored with nursing. I stuck with it and when I completed my rotation in public health nursing, I knew I had found my passion. Keeping people well or caring for them in their homes and community appealed to me much more than caring for acutely ill people in hospitals. So, I did not abandon nursing, I merely adjusted my focus.

Maybe one of you here today enrolled in college with plans to study engineering or music or education. But now, you're here. You have found your purpose – in health services research, behavioral health, community health, epidemiology, health policy or biostatistics. Finding your purpose is only one step. And I know from personal experience that it is okay to adjust or change your focus in the future as you advance in your career.

The second "P" is **preparation**. During your time here at the College of Public Health and Health Professions, you have been preparing for your career. Basic preparation is important; indeed, it is critical. I know you feel ready to go out and practice what you have learned over these past years. Preparation does not stop when you receive your diploma. It really is true that learning is a life-long process. And I am not just talking about continuing education courses or additional degrees – even though those are important. I learned some of my most profound lessons from my patients, from patient advocates, from mentors, and from people not even in the health care field. I urge you to take advantage of various learning opportunities because you never know what direction your career will take.

After graduating from UNC with my master's degree, I relocated to Washington, DC to work as a Presidential Management Intern in the federal Department of Health and Human Services where I focused on projects primarily related to community health services. Soon thereafter, I left the federal government and went to the National Academy of Sciences at the Institute of Medicine where my work focused on nursing education and encouraging nurses to work in underserved areas. After that study ended, I joined the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service and worked for a couple of years before returning to UNC for additional preparation. Like many young people, I was restless. Perhaps I had not completely answered the question, what do I want to be when I grow up? However, I never strayed far from my purpose of being a public health professional. Looking back, I now see how all of my various jobs, assignments and studies prepared me for opportunities to come.

The wonderful thing is that sometimes in life, the reality that unfolds is better than anything we could have hoped for—better than anything that we could have dreamed of. When I first graduated from UNC, I had no idea that unforeseen circumstances would move me toward a life I never could have imagined—one that led me to stand before you today. This makes me no different than anyone else here. All of us have seen our lives shaped by a confluence of events, opportunities and sometimes challenges that have emerged without warning, changing our lives in ways that we never could have foretold.

You found your purpose, you are now prepared for the third “P” which is **performance**. It is now time to put your education to work. Your education is a gift. As of March 2011, only 30 percent of Americans over the age of 25 had a college degree and only about 11 percent held a graduate degree. You have achieved something that most Americans have not. I believe that you have a responsibility to use your gift wisely. Your patients, your community, the world needs you and your service. Whatever you choose to do, where ever you choose to practice, always perform at the highest level of which you are capable. In other words, just like your parents said, do your best!

While I was working in the various positions I mentioned earlier, I do believe that I always tried my hardest to do my best. And it was noticed. I was using my newly minted PhD research skills when my supervisor asked me to lead an HIV/AIDS program that provides grant funding to community health clinics pay for primary care and support services for people living with HIV/AIDS. I would like to say that I jumped at the opportunity but that would be a serious rewrite of history. I did not know much about the disease since HIV and AIDS happened after I graduated from nursing school. Certainly, I had heard about it, but I was by no means an expert. So I resisted, but my boss insisted.

With a little nudge, I took a leap of faith into AIDS work. Why?

- Because I trusted the people who asked me to make the move and trusted that they saw something in me— in this opportunity;
- Because of encouragement: I stepped into unfamiliar territory because I was supported and encouraged by leaders around me.
- Because of need: Public health is all about serving the greater community, and when it came to HIV/AIDS, there was a lot of need.

I was now part of a world, a movement, and a journey that had previously been unknown to me. I was now joined with others in the pursuit of something better for people living with HIV/AIDS. And it has been a great journey for the past 19 years during which time I have seen the transformation of the HIV epidemic from an acute to a chronic, manageable disease in the U.S. And, using my nursing and public health skills, I helped stand up community-based care and treatment programs for people living with HIV and AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean as part of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief or PEPFAR.

Directing the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program and global HIV/AIDS programs was an extraordinary privilege and an awesome responsibility—neither of which I would have ever had without some pretty wonderful people. Some terrific and inspiring professors. Some brave people along the way who decided to take a chance on me. Some inspiring people who encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone.

If you take anything away from today, I hope it is this: the most important thing to learn in school is how to be a student in every part of your life. Some of life's most important lessons occur outside the classroom. Find the courage to do the right thing when big opportunities come your way.

Which brings me to the final "P" which is **power**. You have the power to change the world. When I was in nursing school, I thought that I work in a community health clinic and perhaps eventually run such a clinic. I was very limited in my thinking. Please learn from my experience and never limit your aspirations. To quote Robert Browning, "... a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" You have the power to advocate for your patients and to improve the lives of those around us. You have opportunity to improve the health of our communities, our nation and our world.

We have been brought together by a shared pathway, and we are united by opportunity to make things better. There are opportunities to serve out there, and people are counting on you to engage. Use what you have received here at the College of Public Health and Health Professions to make a difference.

In conclusion, you have found your purpose (and hopefully your passion), you are prepared and ready to perform. You have met the pre-requisites. Use your power to make a difference. We all need you, we are all counting you.

Thank you and best wishes.