GRADUATION KEYNOTE SPEECH : “THE FIRST TIME EVER”

FOR

BEVIS SYLVESTER

REVISED

Hello everyone. “I am so happy to be here on this auspicious occasion!” I remember the first time I ever heard those words. It was at my high school graduation 20 years ago, and here we are, 20 years later, at the same school, and I have to say-I don’t remember much from that day except those few words that were said by the former Chief Minister, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Only time, experience and wisdom will teach us and remind us of what moments will leave a lasting impression in life. Back then I was just a boy and I had other interests. I barely paid attention to my elders. I had to learn the hard way. Today I stand before you, as a graduate of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ High School, Class of 1992, and it is my intention to give all of you the encouragement and advice you all deserve. I want to give you thoughts that would have helped to guide me through my life. Some people say that hindsight is 20/20. I also realize that today is a big day for all of you graduates from the class of 2012, and although I am sure there are many celebrations to still experience, I’d like a few minutes of your time and attention. It is my intention that in 20 years, when we all return, God willing, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the class of ’92 and the 20th anniversary of the class of ’12, that some of you will come up to me and say, I remember what you said at graduation. It was the first time I ever ………

To all of you here today, the graduating class of 2012, my fellow alumni from the class of 1992, to the faculty and staff of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, to all of the distinguished guests here with us today (**Name the honored guests**) – Governor \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, Prime Minister \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and of course to all of **the parents and families** of our graduates-you are the most important people here today, because without you, we wouldn’t have these beautiful young people to celebrate as they are about to begin their adult lives. I want to say what an honor and a privilege it is to have the opportunity to speak to all of you together at this very special event. If anyone would have told me 20 years ago that I would be speaking in front all of you at this “auspicious occasion,” I would have checked them to see if they had a fever!! (**Say that with feeling and wait for the laugh**) The fact that I am standing here before you is a testament to hard work, persistence, belief in oneself, and the power of learning lessons both in school and in life-even the hard lessons. Having a strong foundation and the willingness to learn is essential in living a worthwhile life.

20 years have passed since 144 young and eager students graduated from \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ High School. What has that 20 years looked like? What did life bring us and how did we handle it? What is there to learn from the experiences we’ve had so far? There are many people here today who were with me back then, and some are not. (**Name some of your classmates who have achieved success**). \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ has spent the last 20 years studying and working to become \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and has really inspired so many of us. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ has chosen to become a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and in turn has done so much work to support the community and its citizens. Unfortunately, some of our brothers and sisters did not survive, and that is truly a tragedy. We are only 37 years old with our lives unfolding before us, yet some of just couldn’t survive for one reason or another. (**Name the people from your graduating class who have passed on**) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ was a great friend and classmate of ours back in the early 90’s. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ had so much promise, but unfortunately met with a very untimely death. He/she will be missed. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ also left us way too soon. (**If some of your teachers are present say**) I am sure my fellow classmates will never forget the contributions to our education made by teachers like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and of course, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Sadly, several of the teachers who had such a profound influence on our young lives have passed on as well. People like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ who will always be remembered for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ - I remember her like it was yesterday. I can still recall what it was like to sit in her classroom and learn- in spite of myself!!! It is very sad to think of all of the people we have lost over the years, but there is a valuable lesson to be learned as a result of their passing on, and that is that we really must appreciate every moment as though it might be our last. We’ve all heard the expression, “Don’t put off for tomorrow what you can do today,” and it’s an essential lesson to learn in life. Let me put this another way. Try to recall the last time you really wanted something and you wanted it **RIGHT. NOW**. Now try to think of how anxious you became after every little delay or pause that got in the way of you having what you wanted. Ahhhh!!! It didn’t feel too great, did it?? So, from this we learn-Cherish each day. Appreciate what you have. And most of all, do not take anything for granted, as it just may not be there tomorrow-this goes for friendships, opportunities, and valuable lessons to be learned. Time waits for no one. Change is inevitable. Be prepared.

I now want to speak to all of you graduates as one student of life to another. I stand before you as someone who has learned the most valuable lessons-the hard way. Today I have a wonderful career as an executive of a petroleum company in charge of the Caribbean region. I also believe in giving back to the citizens of our community and country and I do my best to make a positive impact in the world of politics in order to serve all of you, but my road was not a smooth one. Since graduation, I have met with many struggles in life. I have even been to prison. Let me tell you all something-prison is harder than school!!! But every experience we have in life is an opportunity to learn, and from the struggles I had, I learned that it is far more productive to place my efforts in a positive direction!!! I learned that energy spent wisely yields great rewards-and I mean that in all respects. I learned that **KNOWLEDGE** truly is **POWER**, and I have dedicated my life to learning every day and in turn I share my lessons with all of the people I am fortunate to meet and know.

To all of our 2012 graduates, consider today The First Time Ever. Although every day we live is a gift, and every day provides the chance to experience and learn something new, today is the first time for so many things. Although you are completing your high school careers, today is the first time you can say that you have completed the foundation of your education. Some of you will go on to college while others of you will enter the professional world. No matter how you choose to continue your lives and education, you are all going to be experiencing many “first times ever” in your lives. I suggest that you keep your eyes and ears open, observe life around you and be sure to take notes! It will be the people who are observant who will inherit the world. Now is not the time to rest. You’ll have plenty of time to do that when you’re older-**MUCH** older. Now is the time to really get to know yourselves, appreciate yourselves, and begin to make the plans you will implement to become responsible, giving, caring and considerate adults.

When my classmates and I graduated from \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ High School 20 years ago, the world was a different place. Although we have more sophisticated technology now, designed to make our lives “easier,” in many ways life was much easier years ago-well maybe life was **“simpler”** and not necessarily “easier.” I know that as a high school graduate, I thought that I would “conquer the world.” I am sure my fellow graduates and I thought we knew everything there was to know, and we would all start our adult lives with many career and educational paths to choose from. We didn’t realize that in the future, or in times like these, we really had to be prepared for life’s opportunities and challenges. We didn’t realize that the technology explosion that was about to burst upon our lives would have such an impact on the amount of information we receive each day and the competition for survival that is created by these conditions. I am sure you are all very fluent in “techno speak” but don’t get too sure of yourselves just yet… in order to maintain your edge in your life and careers-whatever you choose to do- you will have to constantly feed your own personal techno piggy bank, and what I mean by that is that although you may be proficient in your computer skills today, I promise you there will be something new to learn tomorrow. Remain open to learning about **everything**. Remain open to how you will receive the information. Keep in mind that although I graduated in 1992 through the diploma system, there is also the possibility that CXC exams and certificates may be the new means to graduation in the future. Although I personally prefer the diploma system and it worked for me, and I would like to see that system remain in place, students of life must be prepared to learn and succeed in an ever-changing world filled with new techniques and methods designed to continually expand our knowledge base.

We are here today, together at this wonderful graduation and anniversary ceremony. I stand before you flanked by a tree of life. As each one of you graduates reach for your diplomas, remember that you have earned these acknowledgements through hard work, respect, resilience and persistence. The diplomas are placed on this tree so that you can reach for them in actuality and symbolically. The English poet Robert Browning famously said, “…A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, Or what is Heaven for?” In other words, dream. It’s good to dream. It’s essential to dream. Dreams give us goals, but unless we do some work-reaching out, so to speak, to work to achieve our dreams and goals, they are just simple fantasies.

Now that you are on your way to continue your life’s education, I want to share a story with you. There was an astronomy class of 29 students and for their final class assignment, they had to look through the telescope and explain what they saw. The first student looked through and said he saw nothing. The professor said to that student, “You fool!!! Is there something wrong with you? You must see something- adjust the lens.” He adjusted the lens and looked again and he called out what he was to see. He said, “I see the stars, the moon, and the planets.” Student after student came up and said what they were supposed the have seen until the 28th student approached the telescope. When he looked he said, “I see nothing.” The teacher became impatient and said, “You must be a fool!!! All the others saw many things and have received "A," but you can't see anything!!” The professor said, “You are getting an "F." The teacher pulled the telescope away from the student. When the professor looked through the lens, it was black and as he checked to see what was wrong, he noticed the lens cover was still on.   28 students said they saw things that weren’t there, but because they did not want to be signaled out, they all went along with the lie.   But the 29th student was willing to stand alone and speak the truth.  What do we learn from this? You cannot be fearful of telling the truth or being singled out. That’s a lesson for ALL of us to learn and practice as we set forth in our adult lives.

To all of the distinguished guests who are here with us today, I have a few words for you as well. To all of our honored government officials, look at this handsome and eager graduating class. They are our future. Notice each one is an individual, and each young man and young woman in this graduating class is unique. Each one has his or her own strengths and weaknesses and each one has the potential to be great, but it is up to all of us adults to be inspired by our future generations and nurture each young person in a way that supports their growth, integrity and desire to contribute to the good of the world. Every child and young adult in our educational system deserves to be appreciated for who he or she is, and not be ushered through a “cookie cutter” educational system. It is up to committed and caring adults in government, administration and education to invest inspiration and creativity to insure that truly effective education inspires our future-and here it is-standing before us, reaching for their diplomas-their ticket to adulthood. As adults, we all realize that in order to survive in this world, we all need to have more information and tools in our own arsenals for success. As mentors to future generations, it is up to all of us to raise the bar when it comes to grooming our youth for survival in the future. It is up to each one of us to pay more attention, challenge our students more, and teach them how to stretch their minds so that they are fully prepared to face the challenges that will present themselves on the road to adulthood and responsibility.

Graduates, you are about to leave the safe harbor of high school and for many of you, you will be on your own, “for the first time ever.” Your parents and families have done their best to encourage and nurture you this far, and now it is your turn to take what you’ve learned and make your mark in this world. Remember to respect and honor your parents and families. You would not be here without them. Remember to operate in life with faith, spirit and integrity. Don’t ever forget your roots and your heritage. Never forget the power of prayer and the guidance you can always discover through living a faith-based life. We are all so proud of each one of you and we look forward to observing your rites of passage as you become fine, educated, caring citizens of this wonderful country.

Thank you all and Congratulations!