EXCELLENCE SPEECH

FOR

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Hello students, teachers, faculty and faithful, parents, family and friends. Today we are gathered in the spirit of acknowledgement. We are here to celebrate excellence and to recognize the students who have demonstrated that they are beginning to understand what excellence means. I want to congratulate the students we are honoring here today. You have done a wonderful job of learning and demonstrating your commitment to the power of education. You have inspired all of us to find strength in knowledge and power in faith. You have inspired me as well, and there are some thoughts I have on the subject of excellence and achievement that I would like to share with all of you.

During our educational careers, and all through our adolescence, we dedicate our lives and thoughts and prayers to learning just what excellence means and what it takes to reach goals and experience the feeling of a job done consciously, carefully and with excellence. We have all grown up reading the wisdom of those who built our civilization, and throughout history, we have been shown the way of excellence from people whose words have withstood the test of time. Aristotle said, “Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. **We are what we repeatedly do**. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” In modern times, the famed basketball coach Pat Riley has said, “Excellence is the gradual result of **always striving to do better**.” I want you to really listen to that…”always striving to do better.” Today is a special day when we take the time to celebrate the accomplishments of our honorees, and words of encouragement are always welcome, but as you learn and grow and blossom into young adults, you will find that the cheering section may not always follow you. Of course you always have The Lord to guide you, but part of accepting honors at this stage in your lives is to really feel the acknowledgement and to know deep down inside that you have everything you need to be a success in this world. As long as you always remember to “**strive to do better**,” you will have what it takes to have a rich and fulfilling life. In Colossians 3:23-24, we learn, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”

We all have idols and heroes that we look up to-people who have shown the world that they have a deep respect for excellence in how they perform and what they do. There have been many examples of excellence demonstrated by members of our faith and although the list can get long, I would like to mention a few of them.

* Earl “Magic” Johnson is one of the greatest basketball players of our time. He is a five-time NBA champion and is in the NBA Hall of Fame. Magic Johnson is synonymous with perseverance, success and motivation. He was a brilliant athlete and after he left basketball, he has chosen to dedicate his life to his businesses and his community. Along with being the principal in the Magic Johnson Movie Theaters, he is a motivational speaker and he, along with a group called the Guggenheim Partners successfully won a bid to buy the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team, a move that will energize and inspire sports fans and Los Angeles for years to come. As a sports figure, Magic Johnson really learned what kind of drive and determination it takes to be excellent and to maintain that spirit through all that a person does in life.
* The musician Prince grew up Seventh Day Adventist and literally found his voice-his strength and discipline through music. He has sold over 100 million records, including many platinum recordings as well. He has been inspiring his audiences with his soulful and infectious music and lyrics for many years and is considered one of the greats in the field of modern music. He is another example of how the passion for excellence can inspire millions. He is also an interesting example because he doesn’t necessarily fit our pictures of what excellence might look like. Knowing that Prince is committed to his faith as well as his career can serve to open our eyes to appreciate unexpected excellence!
* Rear Admiral Barry Black was elected to be the 62 Chaplain of the United States Senate. That would be quite an accomplishment on its own considering that the Senate elected its first Chaplain in 1789! He was also the first African American Chaplain of the Senate and the first Seventh Day Adventist to be elected to that post as well. Rear Admiral Black demonstrated his commitment to excellence throughout his career in which he served as a Chaplain in the United States Navy for 27 years, constantly challenging himself and his skills, and as demonstrated by his rank upon retirement, Chief of Chaplains of the United States Navy, he too, knew what it took to honor his country, the military, his comrades, his faith and his devotion to excellence.
* Imagine a woman, way back in the mid-1800’s, only 17 years old, whose vision and passion and faith was so strong; a person who was so committed to sharing the word of our Lord, that she actually was the major force behind a religion-**OUR** religion? Imagine the power of that woman, imagine the strength she sought and received from the Lord, and imagine **HER** dedication to her purpose and her beliefs. That woman was Ellen G. White. It is so inspirational to think that anyone back then could feel so much commitment to a cause. It is staggering to think that in the mid-1800’s, a woman-and a **YOUNG** woman at that, would be so determined for her voice and ideas to be heard. Imagine all of the other ideas and innovations she had, from vegetarianism to beginning the first real health networks. Clearly, Ellen G. White was an amazing person who was dedicated to sharing the gospel, supporting her community and the world, learning and teaching, all in the cause of the pursuit of excellence.

I once heard a little story that I’d like to share with you. A long time ago, a little girl came home from school and when her mother saw her, she seemed upset. The mother asked what was wrong and the little girl cried, “Mommy, today I was punished at school for something I didn’t do.” The mother was outraged and said she would go to the school the very next day and demand to speak to the teacher. The little girl seemed to calm down at that idea, and then the mother asked, “By the way, what was it that you ’didn’t do?’” And the little girl very quietly said, “My homework.” (**Wait for the laugh**) As we celebrate the students who are being honored today, we have to remember that excellence is not just about doing your homework and studying and getting good grades. Of course that is an essential part of the process, but we also have to remember the other characteristics in the presence of excellence:

* **PRACTICE**- We all know that “practice makes perfect,” and remember the words of Pat Riley. Always strive to do better.
* **PERSERVERANCE** – Years ago, I remember there was a commercial on the television. It was for a car rental company that wasn’t “Number 1” in their field. Their slogan was, “We try harder.” Always remember to try harder. Don’t allow yourself to be discouraged. Have faith in yourself and discover the winner inside you!!
* **PRIDE** – and by pride I don’t mean “arrogance.” The definition of pride is “a feeling of satisfaction derived from one’s own achievements.” Let’s put it this way…. work hard. Succeed. Acknowledge your accomplishment. Set greater goals.
* **ENTHUSIASM** – energy breeds energy. You are young and full of life, and you are at the very beginning of your adult adventures. We have all been given such a gift to be alive and have the blessings we have. Appreciate every moment-even the times that seem challenging-think of how much brighter the sun shines after a rainstorm.
* **POSITIVITY** – In Joshua 1:9, remember, “Have I not commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee withersoever thou goest.” You are being guided and watched over. Shine and be positive in HIS presence.
* **FAITH** – Each one of you has the greatest ally in the LORD. He gives us our strength. In Ephesians 6:16, we learn, “In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” Remember- the “evil one” can be thought of as many things-ignorance, distraction, laziness. Your faith and belief can guide you to great success and personal accomplishment.

I just remembered another little story I would like to share. I heard a story about some students that were lined up in their school cafeteria for lunch. They noticed a large bowl of shiny apples at the head of the table. As the line progressed, the sign under the bowl of apples became visible. The students realized that the sign was made by one of the nuns and it said, “Take only one. God is watching.” As the line moved even further, a huge tray of chocolate cookies loomed at the other end of the table, and then a sign clearly made by one of the younger students was seen propped up next to that tray and it said, “Take all you want. God is watching the apples.”

As you go back to your classrooms and projects and extracurricular activities and families and friends, remember that God is always watching. He wants you to succeed in everything you do! Even if you should fail, it is all part of the process of learning and achieving goals. Remember that all success is can be described as getting up one more time than you fall. You just have to believe in yourselves!! Believe that **NOTHING** can stop **you**!!! I invite each one of you to take today’s experience and sense of pride and accomplishment with you and be inspired. Be inspired to share the energy and motivation that comes from knowing you were able to break through to new achievements.

It has been a real gift to have this opportunity to speak with all of you and I look forward to being inspired by all of you well into the future!!! Congratulations, here’s to continued excellence, and thank you!!