GRADUATION SPEECH

FOR

JAMES JENCKS

Hello everyone!! To Doctor Bona, our Board of Trustees, Faculty Members, family, friends, fellow Phi Theta Kappa members and fellow graduates, - WOW! What an honor to speak on behalf of Kellogg Community College’s 2014 graduating class. If I may say so, it’s also an honor and a real joy to welcome my mother and my **GRANDMOTHER** here today to this year’s commencement exercises!!! (**If you want to make a little humorous reference to the history of the Kellogg legacy you can say**) Think about it!! Who knew that way back when I was a kid and I was eating all that delicious cereal, that one day I would be standing in front of this wonderful crowd, representing the graduating class of 2014 at Kellogg Community College?!?! Talk about “thinking outside the box… or the cereal bowl!! (**Say that with enthusiasm and wait for the laugh)** And believe me… and you can check with my mother… she’s right over there (**Point to where your mother is seated**) we probably had a brief vision what it might be like if and when I graduated from college, but trust me… we never **EVER** thought it would look like this… that I would be in my fifties, with several thousand miles and a couple of thousand experiences under my belt, but here we are and this moment is sweeter than you will ever know. The values of the Kellogg Foundation and of WK Kellogg’s legacy include “belief in helping people help themselves through the practical application of knowledge and resources to improve their quality of life.” That statement more than resonates with me and the journey I have taken in my life so far. My time at KCC has taught me well. Most of all it has taught me to embrace changes and trust my gut. This graduation is special on so many levels. We’re about to leave college and go off on our professional paths in life, and although those roads are as unique and varied as each one of you, my fellow graduates, we have to keep in mind that as our lives change today, they will always change. We are aware of it today because this is a milestone in our lives-the before is KCC the after is?? Who knows for some of us and as I represent this year’s class, I want you to realize that I am the living testimony to the benefits and rewards of embracing change.

You might be wondering… “Hmmm… I wonder what **HIS** story is…” and I’ll give you the brief version as a way for you to imagine what life might have been like and why my time here at KCC has been so special, As I tell the story think of your lives so far. Think about how you’ve formulated rules to live by, think about how inflexibility might have affected your progress in life, and then think what it would be like to keep an open mind and embrace change-because it’s going to happen whether you like it or not.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “There is nothing permanent except change.” Ladies and gentlemen, that’s the story of my life!! Years ago, as I hitchhiked around the US and Canada with my trusty German shepherd, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, I picked up the nickname, “Beau Jangles.” He did tricks and I tap danced as we-or really I panhandled for food. After a couple of years on the road, I called my mom and went home… I was getting tired of people thinking I was a draft dodger… after all; it was the Vietnam War era but what people didn’t realize was that I was only sixteen years old when I started out. I began my education in change during my life on the road and as I landed at home in Denver, my mother met us and I asked her to take me to a recruiter. With machinist skills and aviation and marketing experience, I got a job at Boeing in Washington State. I got laid off after one year and found myself at Pratt and Whitney in Connecticut. Four years later with another lay off to deal with and an ailing grandfather, I went to Battle Creek. My grandpa died and I stayed on to help Grandma. I managed to get a job with Union Pump right here in Battle Creek. Someone saw some potential in me, and my union asked me to work as a organizer at the international level. After all of those years of moving and searching and trying to find my way in the world, I felt like I had arrived. I found a job that I really felt was mine for life. I loved what I was doing-the interaction with people, the management of situations, being exposed to diverse environments and learning how others lived and worked- I couldn’t have asked for a better job. I was there for fifteen years… a really impressive run in anyone’s book, and then **WHAM!**! It happened. I got laid off. Only this time I was older and although I had more experience, it really affected me. I wasn’t prepared and after fifteen years, much of my identity and sense of personal achievement was tied to my professional self. Without my job, who was I? Finding oneself in a crisis like that is a huge loss and as with a death, I went through different stages and emotions associated with grief. I went from shock to anger to “Why me?” to a really dark sense of worthlessness. How is a person supposed to get it together and sell him- or herself in the job-hunting process while feeling so much self-doubt and fear? I knew that the longer I remained without a job, the harder it would be for me to start back up, but I just didn’t know how to get out of my own way. I was very productive in one area, however- and that was questioning my worth. I was afraid to start again; after all I had been “burned.” The thought of placing myself on a new road taking new risks frightened me. My inner voice taunted me with, “What if I try a new path and I get lost?” I had thoughts of being too old and set in my ways, but somewhere along the line I realized that I had to change and I had to tap into the experiences I had and the passions I identified with in order to reinvent my life again. Almost as If I sensed the expression, “Be the change you want to see in the world,” I realized that I was the one who had to approach life and opportunities differently. I was the one to change. There’s an expression “Adapt or die.” You know what? Learn that while you’re young because it’s **true**.

One day while I was at the Battle Creek VA signing up for healthcare benefits, I “read the writing on the wall,” literally. There was a sign and pamphlets outlining veteran’s benefits. I went home and did some research on educational programs and it just happened that President Obama had recently funded the Veteran’s Retraining Assistance Program, known simply as VRAP. The program was designed for veterans age 35 to 60 that had been laid off… suddenly I didn’t feel quite so alone. As I explored I found there were options…. different tunnels to explore within the matrix of life and although some tunnels are dead ends, there is definitely light at the end of other ones… you just have to be willing to change your path when needed. The program provided education and training for veterans in high demand fields. I applied and was accepted to the first program along with 53,000 other veterans that were in similar situations. There were 53,000 other people in the same boat as me!! And we were all about to embrace change!! I realized that with my past union experience and my passion for employee advocacy, I chose Business Management with an emphasis on Human Resources. I also saw that Kellogg Community College had an excellent reputation and in a way it was a “legacy” school for me as others in my family had attended, as did my wife Vicki. KCC had a lot more going for it as well. The school is well located, affordable and had a generous and welcoming attitude towards veterans. For the first time in a long time, I felt I had found a place for myself.

There are so many other reasons why I chose to attend this school and each one proved time and again that I made the right choice. The courses offered were relevant to my interests and focus, they offered a degree program that supported my purposes and I saw that there was also a great opportunity to network and connect with professionals in my chosen field. My time at KCC has proven to be invaluable. My connections made at here have been fascinating, enriching, and eye opening. Don’t forget, here I was, a man in my mid-fifties entering college, would I be the odd man out? Would I be accepted by my classmates, would we have the opportunity to communicate and brainstorm, or would I spend my time at KCC in isolation? As Churchill once said, “We have noting to fear but fear itself.” Through time I found myself engaged more fully with students and faculty, all of whom were not only interested in what I had to share, but they were interesting as well. There were several kindred souls among my classmates throughout my time at KCC. They sought my opinion and “wisdom” to the point where I initiated regular study groups in many classes. On Sundays it wasn’t unusual to find upwards of fifteen or sixteen students at my home. I loved being a part of the give and take forged with my colleagues and I learned from them as much as they hopefully learned from me. The main thing I took away from that experience is the message I have been conveying… change your viewpoint. Remain open to new and exciting opportunities. Don’t keep going down the same tunnel looking for cheese that’s not there. I have to say that it was so refreshing to be surrounded by so much optimism and enthusiasm. It was infectious!! I’d like to acknowledge some faculty and staff members as well, for opening my eyes and keeping them open. Thank you so much to John Dilworth, Kim Madsen, Brad Ward, and Kim Montney as well as TJ Mohl and Laura Miller.

Ultimately, I want to invite each one of you to keep some important things in mind. Believe in yourselves. Take pride in your work and distinguish yourself with excellence. This world is getting way too competitive-in every area-for complacency and mediocrity. Each one of us has something unique about our character or our skill set or the way we connect with people. Use what you have and embrace challenge and change. And believe me, the world is changing. Be in tune with what the marketplace demands-no matter where you may be or what profession you choose. Years ago, people were “hired for life.” That’s no longer the case. Loyalty has a different meaning and there are new words in the professional lexicon that have priority. Stay hungry. Achievement is great, but there is no time to rest on your laurels. Each one of us is blessed to have what we have, and in order to keep it, we have to be able to anticipate change, be aware of what’s around us and what isn’t-or what has gone, and find the way to trust your souls and your guts to sustain you. In the end, live your lives with all of your senses and move with the times. I have been so blessed to have had the challenges that have provided me with the education and riches of a lifetime, and I wish the same for all of you. Thank you all, and I wish for each one of you the gift of change!!