**15451, Sharrona Williams**

Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is truly an honor to be asked to be invited to return to my alma mater to speak to you graduates today. Today you celebrate the end of one season and prepare to step out into a new season. You have all worked hard to finish school with excellence and I know you are excited about the next steps you are about to take. Some of you have well laid plans that you can’t wait to begin. I want to encourage you to keep an open mind about your future. Life can throw you some unexpected detours that can turn out to be better than your best laid plans. Let me tell you a story as an example.

As a youth I was the only girl out of four kids from a single parent home, and because of this I strove to be very competitive. My mother was my consistent example of hard work and adversity that only makes you stronger. When I was in high school I was a star athlete. I even had a full ride scholarship for basketball until I tore my ACL during a game, causing me to be sidelined for the season when my injury required knee surgery. This was my first experience with Orthopedics and I fell in love with it as a science and as a future career.

Later I received a full ride scholarship for basketball and blew out my other knee. That was career ending, despite the fact that I won a scholar=athlete award my sophomore year. Since I couldn’t play basketball any more I had to find a new focus and a new passion to replace basketball. That’s what I mean by life throwing you a curve and having to make new plans that turn out better than your original plans. Due to my injuries I had learned about orthopedics and I loved it because it meant I could still work with sports, helping other athletes recover from injuries.

The athletics I learned as a youth became a theme for my life, not something in passing that I had to give up completely. Being an athlete, being part of a team taught me teamwork, competitiveness and discipline. These themes translate to every aspect of life and are the center of finding your passion. And once a person discovers their passion, success will follow. There is an old saying that if you figure out a way to earn a living doing what you love, then you will never work a day in your life.

Teamwork is a life skill that not everyone appreciates or learns. But, most things in life cannot be achieved by a lone wolf. We all need to work with a team to one degree or another. We learn through experience that we need others to help us succeed and in return we help others so they can succeed. Once we learn the necessity of working with a team, then we need to learn how to choose our team members wisely for the projects we undertake. The right combination of team members can make or break the success of a project.

Competitiveness is something we all have to learn. Some of us are born with a natural competitive spirit. If you are not one of those blessed with that natural competitive spirit, then I encourage you to develop some amount of competitiveness for your own success in life. Even if you are not a competitive person, others who you come in contact with will complete against you whether you compete against them or not. For your own professional success you need to be able to compete when necessary even if it is not your chosen way to reach your goals. Learning how to compete successfully will aid you in reaching your goals with greater success and less stress. Avoiding competition will only bring frustration because those who are competitive will not cease to be so just because you don’t go after a goal that way.

Last but not least, discipline is something that will serve you in work, in play, in success, in defeat and everything in between. If you insist on developing a healthy discipline in whatever you do in life, then you will be handle whatever life throws at you, positive or negative. It is when you have not made preparation for the unexpected by just taking things as they come with no discipline and no planning that you find yourself in a losing battle.

In my life, I learned to roll with what life threw at me. It required all my skills of teamwork, competiveness and discipline to roll with those punches. Those skills were learned and developed over time and were constantly honed and improved. At first, there would be a lag time while I figured out what happened, like when I injured my knee. Then, even when I had the first idea of wanting to go into orthopedics, it was a process to learn how to get from where I was in the hospital bed to where I am today as an orthopedic surgeon. It was a process. Even now if life throws something at me it’s still a process, but it’s a process that I am able to navigate more comfortably, more wisely and on a shorter timeline because I have been serious about learning the necessary life skills.

Just as it is imperative that you plan for all reasonable contingencies, it is necessary to have your priorities in order. You will know when you have discovered something that drives your passion. It will be unmistakable. It will fuel your energy, it will guide you to find your team and it will strengthen your discipline. When you find something that does all three, then you will know you have found your passion.

Once you have found your passion, then you need to use that threefold combination of traits – teamwork, competitiveness, and discipline – to pursue your passion. When you combine those traits, and the passion they evoke, then you will succeed. That success may not come easy. Life will try to keep you from succeeding. It will throw you curves. But, if you keep your eye on the prize and your mind on your goal, then you will reach your success.

Life didn’t leave me alone just because it stopped my basketball career. I made the necessary adjustments and changed my passion. But I am still translating that passion through other sports, as well as my chosen career in orthopedics. Pursuing your passion isn’t just about your career, it’s about the things you do with passion in causes you promote. I have pursued my passion to make a positive difference in the world in many ways. When I was young I honorably served in the U.S. Navy ROTC program. I have participated in “Pedal for Pets” and “Cycling Across America” programs. I underwent knee replacement surgery and aggressive recovery therapy so that I could participate in the latter.

But, I have found ways to give back to my community in ways that do not require me to be athletic. I am very involved in my community and teach several community workshops. I also teach children how to swim in order to combat childhood obesity. There are many statistics that show childhood obesity is a rising problem in our society today. It affects a child’s view of themselves and their self-esteem. The low self-esteem causes other physical problems, emotional problems and will even hinder a child from reaching their potential as they mature. By reaching out to them before all that manifests within the child, we can help them overcome those challenges. These are only a few ways I have used my skill as a surgeon, along with the traits of competitiveness, teamwork, and discipline, combined with my passion to help others, to make a positive difference in the world around me.

So, I stand here now, as you stand at the precipice of a new season, and encourage you to seek and find you’re your passion. When you do go after it with all that is within you and you will find your success. Once you find that success and know the passion that drives it, figure out the different ways you can use your skills and talents to make a difference in the world around you using those skills and talents, and pour your passion into that as well.

There is no substitute for passion. There is no substitute for teamwork. There is no substitute for discipline. There is no substitute for healthy competition. Put them all together and you are guaranteed success. The key is learning how to recognize them in your life, then learning how to put them work in your life. Combine the passion, the skills, talents, and attributes with your desire to make a difference in the world and you will see an explosion of achievement that will become a legacy for your life that will speak long after you are gone.

Pursue your passion for all it is worth. Make a difference. I know you can do it.

Thank you