**GRADUATION SPEECH**

**FOR**

**GLEN WORTHY**

Hello everyone. I am Glen Worthy and it is my privilege and pleasure to be here today at the University of New Haven Tow Youth Justice Institute graduation exercises for 2022. I want to acknowledge a few people. (**Name the people that invited you, administrators, etc**) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I would like to congratulate all of the graduates we honor here today…. After all, without you…. We wouldn’t be here… **REALLY**. (**wait for the laugh**), and oddly enough, I would like to acknowledge **MY** parents for all they’ve done for me…. For bringing me to life…. For giving of themselves and their time, no matter what we **DIDN’T** have as I grew up, and most of all, for giving me such a fortuitous and motivating last name…. **WORTHY** (**Wait for the laugh… if you think it’s funny**). The truth of the matter is, that no matter the conditions surrounding us at birth… no matter the struggles and hardships we face growing up and throughout youth and adolescence…. No matter the forces that conspire to lure us to toxic environments and habits… no matter the “jargon” that gets thrown at us as we fight and try to fend off downward spirals…. **WE. ARE. WORTHY**.

Now that you know my last name, I’d like to tell you a little bit about myself, because I, like so many of you, have survived the challenges of a life of poverty, adversity, and somehow, found and focused on, a glimmer of hope. I was born and raised in New Haven… maybe it was a “Haven” for **SOME PEOPLE**, but in my part of town and in my house, things were **POPPING**!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). Home life was a handful… especially for a little kid… I grew up in a household with very low income, an abundance of serious family dysfunction, food and nutritional insecurity, and most of all, a deep desire to learn, do, and become **MORE** than the circumstances that conspired to suppress me. Somehow, innately, through the hardships, I had a profound realization that there was more to life and I was willing to work for it. I was determined to go through the really hard stuff in order to come out the other end with greater experience and deeper insights into who I am, the strengths I possess, and most of all, what my mission would look like…. And how I would share that experience to support others in finding their own worth. You know what??? Each time, as I look back on what I’ve been through, what I’ve done, and how knowing me has impacted the lives of others, I realize that no matter what, I wouldn’t change a thing… not the poverty… not the insecurities… not the “wild and crazy” family (**if you want, rephrase this in a way that you would feel more comfortable**). Most of all, I realized that adversity and struggle are at the heart of true personal growth and worthwhile results. As human beings, one of the most treasured traits we possess is **empathy**. The basic meaning of empathy is having the ability to feel and understand what another person has gone through. It’s the opportunity to use your struggles and personal experience for **good**… it’s the first step in taking the adversities you’ve been through and rehabilitating that damage into a positive response. When I think of empathy, I realize the struggles I faced inspired motivation and appreciation for everything… the hard won goals achieved as I went through school, the persistence I learned as I would not accept less than I knew I was worthy of, and the gratitude I felt… and feel, for a family, although way from perfect, did whatever they could to guide me and allow me to discover my **worth**.

Malcolm X said, “Without education, you’re not going anywhere in this world.” I want to thank you, graduates, for getting that message and for seeing that there are possibilities… there **IS** another way to live life, to feel heard, and to matter in this world. And as we find our way in this world, and as you graduate and move on to fulfill your individual and collective destinies, the realization that you are seen and heard… that you **MATTER**… and are **WORTHY**… will become increasingly apparent. Your ability to make your mark in this world… your gift to make a difference, is going to be increasingly obvious. The question is…. Do you want to use your **SUPER POWERS** for good or for evil?… To me, that’s a no brainer… you’ve been through the system. You’ve conquered the tough stuff. You **KNOW** that you want to matter, in ways both big and small, and as you leave these services today, every move you will make provides an opportunity for positive change and personal growth. Whether you realize it now or not, people are watching. They’re listening. They’re taking notes. Someone whom you may not even be aware of is learning from you…. observing… just like you did when you were younger. Influence is all around us. Now is the time to be aware that, as you operate in life, so do you influence.

People just want to be heard. We have an innate need to self express…. To make a difference… to leave a mark that says…. “Look at me. I’ve been here. I exist. **I** **MATTER**.” Throughout history, for thousands of years, graffiti, in all its forms and iterations, has been a means of communication. From pre-historic cave paintings to tagging trains and walls within the New York City subway system and beyond, graffiti has been a form of communication, a way to literally, viscerally “leave one’s mark.” To make sure we are all clear about this, I looked up the definition of visceral…. “Relating to deep inward feelings rather than to the intellect.” Yes. What I’m saying is we have an almost animal instinct that drives us to connect and communicate.

Interpersonal human connection… we must never minimize the importance of the effects, both bad and good, we have on one another. At the core of that connection is the basic human need for attention. **NO ONE** wants to be invisible. It’s a delicate balance and a thin line we all try to walk. Not enough, or the wrong kind of attention, and things go bad… really quickly. I know that’s an oversimplification, but I only have about fifteen minutes and you get the point… (**Wait for the laugh**). People get lost in the system. **YOU** might have gotten lost were it not for the compassion and vision of others who **SAW YOU.** You might have gotten lost were it not forthat voice in your gut that knew there was something better… more… on the other side. Acting out and other behaviors are a cry for attention. Graffiti was a form of **SEE ME**. That self expression has evolved….

Thousands of years ago, there were the indelible markings on the Lascaux caves and beyond…. Early graffiti told stories… urged protests… communicated messages of frustration and hope. In the ‘60s, that visceral outcry was colorized and revolutionized by a simple invention… the spray can!!!! Thanks to the aerosol update, graffiti got colorful, bigger, “better…” more impactful. Wow… those early days…. Along the walls by the subway tracks, while some saw rampant destruction, the undeniable energy caused a movement to spread… and **spray**… (**Wait for the laugh**). Did anyone expect that vibe to reach across oceans and continents??? Remember what I said… you **NEVER** know who’s watching.

Someone in France was watching. A young kid by the name of JR was growing up in a rough neighborhood outside of Paris. He started tagging with friends, hitting whatever walls he… and they, could find. One day, he was on a train and found a camera…. And the course of history… art… and even human relations was altered forever.

JR started taking photos of his friends in their “natural habitat,” tagging. For JR, somehow he must have intuitively known the words of Buckminster Fuller, who taught us, “The medium is the message.” Graffiti could influence just so far. Photography??? Well that’s a **WHOLE. NEW. BALLGAME**!!

As the years advanced, JR got deeper and deeper into photography. He saw how his photos **mattered**. He saw how he could make a difference. He saw how having the boldness of being a graffiti artist combined with a laser sharp eye and a sense of space, time, and outrage, inspired him to address the social issues that spark the greatest controversy. He believed that humanity is larger than life, and that community and bringing people together, can be even bigger and greater, than suffering, and so he acted upon his gut instincts.

In recent years, JR and his teams… yes… he rolls **pretty deep** now… (**Wait for the laugh**) have embarked on, and completed, some fairly mind blowing projects. He does incredible, larger than life printouts and paste ups in different scenes and scenarios around the world. All are temporary…. The medium is fleeting … the message remains. From doing full scale pastings in front of the pyramid at the Louvre Museum in Paris to replicating portions of the pyramids in Egypt, his work is compelling, thought provoking, impermanent but lingering. His most powerful pieces carry with them heavy social and political messages.

The main piece that comes to my mind as I stand before you today is the project he did at Tehachapi Prison in Southern California. Tehachapi is a maximum security prison. Here is the explanation of the project from JR’s own website… this describes the scope… and power… “JR and his team photographed the men, one by one, from above, and they were given a chance to tell their story in front of a camera. No specific questions were asked; they had the freedom to express themselves candidly. JR also photographed former prisoners and prison staff, collecting a total of forty-eight portraits and stories from the prison system.

Two weeks later, JR returned with his team to paste 338 strips of paper on the ground. In just a few hours, the prison's incarcerated population worked with guards, former inmates and members of JR's studio, equipped with push brooms and wallpaper glue, to complete the prison yard pasting.

From the prison yard, the final installation image is indiscernible. Yet, from above, it becomes clear - incarcerated people, former inmates, as well as the prison staff, and victims stand shoulder to shoulder. The installation, naturally ephemeral, disappeared in three days under the footsteps of the prison's incarcerated population.”

They stood shoulder to shoulder…. The **prisoners**… the **guards**… **former inmates**…**victims**… they came together and formed a community, so that individually and as a group, they could be **HEARD**.

The lesson …. The message… I am sharing with you today is no matter what… **THINK**… look around you… **BE CURIOUS**… find your way and **MAKE YOUR MARK**. Go out from here and live your lives as though someone is watching…. Because someone **IS**, and you want to make sure your “super powers” are on full display for **GOOD**. We live in very strange times. The “new normal” is anything **BUT THAT** and in order for us to get through, we **ALL** have to get through … with each other.

I **CANNOT** express enough, the importance of knowledge, keeping an open mind, allowing yourself to continue to listen, learn, and to admit mistakes, when they’re made, and grow from them.

Today, as I look out at all of you graduates, I feel a palpable energy…. an energy that conveys pride… hope… possibility. … an energy that clearly tells me, **YOU** are **WORTHY**. Maintain that positivity… fuel your dreams… feed your goals… focus that energy into action…. And keep that feeling. I know… believe me, I know… many times it’s easier said than done… but at the end of the day, you have to answer to your **SELF**. You have to lookin the mirror with pride, confidence, and self respect, and know that you’ve already won. You **MADE IT**. You **DID IT**… now keep that momentum going. That comes with attention, hard work, and respect… from both external sources and from within. I’m also a firm believer that it’s crucial to keep your eyes open, look around, and see the signs placed before you… they are your guides… I just glanced through some posts quickly and saw someone wrote, “Bet on yourself and you can never lose.” **TRUTH**!!! …As long as you’re being the most authentic, mindful version of you.

That having been said, I hope I’ve given you food… and **fuel**, for thought… (**If you want to make a joke, you can say**)… and given the **price of gas** these days… that’s pretty valuable!! (**And wait for the laugh**)… I want to say again, that it has been a pleasure, but more importantly, a **privilege**, to be with you today, and to witness this rite of passage for all you graduates. Nothing in life is easy, but it **IS** worth it, and as you continue on your paths, others, whether you know it or not, will be inspired by your actions. Make them good ones!! Congratulations and thank you all!!