Good Evening, I’d like to thank each of you and Minot State University for this honor. I especially want to thank Dr. Linrud for the presentation of the award.  This award is an affirmation of ambition and I feel both humbled and challenged, because no matter what you achieve in life, there are always more challenges ahead.  So if I could, I would like to share what I’ve learned about the value of persistence and the power of believing in your dreams.

I was born and raised in the North Dakota oilfields before the Bakken was the hottest oil play in the US, and experienced boom and bust cycles with oil prices as low as $3.00 per barrel and as high as $147.00 per barrel. I grew up watching people struggle to make a living in the oil business, but now with the boom North Dakota is experiencing I am delighted to see many of those same people and many others across many industries in the State of North Dakota make their fortunes with the growth this industry has brought to the state. Often when we are young, we are captivated by the outer symbols of wealth: what kind of cars people drive, and how they dress. I too was naïve and had to learn the secret to success was knowledge and a keen understanding of the working principles of business.

 As the youngest of three boys, I struggled with being told you can’t do this or that because you are too young. For me, it only made me want to do more. I wasn’t a stellar student in high school, in fact I was counseled to lower my expectations and apply to trade school. Being told I couldn’t, became a driving force propelling me to prove myself and to achieve even more.

I thank my parents and grandparents for the faith they had in me early on when I took on challenges way beyond my years. At 10 my grandfather died leaving my grandmother alone to run the farm. After working with my grandpa I knew how to tend the livestock and drive a tractor, so under the watchful eyes of my parents and grandmother I began working on the farm.  I loved the hard work and reveled in the challenges that would be expected of someone much older. This gave me the strong work ethic that has fueled my drive for achievement and the will to never compromise my dreams.

I was always thinking about ways I could work and make money. I had two jobs from the time I was 16 through college. I worked on the farm from Spring until Fall and for Ward Williston Oil Company as a lease operator on the weekends and during the summer.

I always thought I would have a career in agriculture, but I loved the accounting / financial side of business and knew if I wanted to pursue a career in this field I would need an education. Minot State University offered an excellent education and it was affordable, yet it was like going to a private college given the small class sizes and attentive professors like Joan Houston and Jay Wahlund, both who encouraged me and helped inspire my confidence.

Many times I found my studies in accounting and finance challenging. Nevertheless, I managed to earn a degree in accounting with a minor in finance. I learned to read financial reports, profit & loss statements, to understand the power of analysis and how to breakdown a company financially.

This was a tremendous asset and after graduation Ward Williston moved me from the field into the front office where I began working for the company’s president, Laurie Cunnington as “Assistant to the President”. My new boss didn’t hesitate in presenting me with many challenges, each time raising the bar a little more.  Her faith in me spurred a desire to succeed and whatever she asked I would answer, “Yes I can do this, I will have it for you first thing in the morning.” To my knowledge I don’t think I ever failed her.

I moved up the ranks from Assistant to the President, to Business Development Analyst, to Corporate Development Manager and eventually Chief Operating Officer.

Rarely do you find yourself in a position to be mentored and coached by extraordinary business leaders. I was fortunate to work for Tom and Laurie Cunnington, the owners of Ward Williston Oil Company. Next to my parents, they were my greatest mentors.

Everything I learned from them and my undergraduate studies at MSU prepared me for my MBA which I earned from University of Michigan. Combining my work experience and my education prepared me for my roles as COO at Ward Williston and for my current position as CEO of Fortis Energy Services, an award winning national oil and gas service company, ranked as one of the top 100 energy companies in America.

In closing I would encourage every student who struggles to stay strong and persevere. Don’t let negative criticism distract you from your goals. Hold on to your dreams and believe in yourself. Don’t think you can’t-- find the way you can. As John C. Maxwell once said, “People go further than they thought they could… when someone else thinks they can”. Think you can and you will.

Thank you once again, I am honored to have received this award.