

**Remarks by Alan C. Page
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Thank you for that kind introduction and for your warm welcome. Thank you also for allowing me to share my thoughts with you this evening. Given BestPrep's focus on education and my passion for ensuring educational opportunity for all children, I am honored to be a part of tonight's program. And congratulations to each of the students being recognized for their essay this evening. What a wonderful experience to be recognized for clearly and concisely articulating your thoughts on the written page. You should be very proud of your accomplishment. When I was your age I was afraid to write. I was afraid that I wasn't good at it and that I wasn't smart enough and would be laughed at and ridiculed. Fortunately, I got over the fear and along the way fell in love with the process of working with words.

One other thought for all the young people here today. When I was your age, it would not have occurred to anyone, that one day, I might accomplish the things that I have.

But, like the path that brought me to this moment, the path that each of you take will provide an opportunity for you to accomplish that which you would never have dreamed possible. The key to whatever success I have had can be found in an unwillingness to be satisfied with playing to the level of the competition, a willingness to push beyond my self-perceived limitations, and a willingness to be involved in the community around me. Those same qualities can be the key to your success.

I believe that children are the future and that the future is about hope. Sadly, in my work as a judge, I saw many young people who engaged in criminal and other antisocial behavior. Some of them had no moral compass. Some had untreated mental health issues. But many, indeed too many, had simply lost hope. That loss of hope was based, in part, on an education system that they knew, without the need for another standardized test, had failed them. A review of the record from trials these young people were involved in identified a common denominator among them. Reading their testimony and witness statements it was clear that they had never learned to think critically. Their reasoning was always fractured and scattered. For them, one plus one never equaled two. Given their inability to think critically, we should not be surprised that they ran afoul of the law or that they had lost hope. Having lost hope, they had nothing left to lose.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said:

There is nothing more dangerous than to build a society with a large segment of people in that society who feel they have no stake in it, who feel that they have nothing to lose. People who have a stake in their society protect that society, but when they don't have it, they unconsciously want to destroy it.

A critical tool for creating hope and giving young people a stake in society, is education.

Certainly, to the extent that I've had success, whether on the athletic field, in the law, or elsewhere, the education I received along the way played an important role. Education put me in position to be prepared and focused. It has allowed me to keep my eye on the ball, so to speak.

Speaking of preparation, as I prepared for this evening's remarks, I was reminded of law school, where I learned preparation's true importance in my first-year contracts class. Instead of lecturing, the professor favored the Socratic method, which, as you may know, entails asking questions of those who are under-enlightened to help lead them to enlightenment—and includes a little intimidation along the way. I still get a little queasy when I think of the day the professor brought one of the guys in the class to tears. Even though I always came to class relatively well-prepared and had performed as a football player in front of hundreds of thousands of people, I was terrified of being called on.

Making myself small and inconspicuous was not one of the choices. So, what could I do?

After surviving the first few days without being called on, I noticed that the professor only called on students who looked like they were afraid. And he never called on anyone who raised their hand. So, I put on my brave face and started raising my hand. For a while, that tactic was rewarded. But then finally, one day I raised my hand and, as luck would have it, lightning struck, he called on me. Without thinking, I stood up to answer the question... and my mind... went... blank. And it stayed blank.

As I scrambled for a cohesive thought, I had momentary empathy for all those quarterbacks I'd been chasing for a living... and then somehow it hit me—I had to say something. Anything was better than silence, so I started speaking. Whatever I said must have been okay.

The lessons that I learned are these: first, that preparation is critical to success. And while preparation in that context means coming to class with your assignments done, it also means

being able to size up a situation and respond appropriately. Second, I learned that we sometimes create our own greatest obstacles. That our fears—rather than the actual situation—may be what limits us. And third, I learned that even if our fears cause us to stumble, good preparation will help us get back up.

For there to be a better future, it is not enough to focus solely on educational development. We must also be consciously involved in character development. In that regard, I have concern for the future of our democracy. Generally, that concern has to do with what I perceive to be a decline in our character, individually and collectively. Why this concern?

Because, when I look around I see excessive greed and a lack of civility, if not aggressive incivility. I see athletes who seem more interested in taunting or showing up their opponent than playing the game. Under the guise of opposing political correctness, I see people who seem to relish in rude and abusive behavior even though opposing political correctness does not require such behavior. I also see political leaders who appear to see no problem with making demonstrably false statements on a regular basis. All of this in plain view of impressionable young people. The message they get is, “if it’s okay for our leaders to act that way, it must be okay for me to do the same.” While each of these examples is problematic, when our leaders send the message to children that lying is okay, that being rude and abusive is okay, we are headed for serious trouble. Clearly, everyone is entitled to their opinion. And, it is fair to have a debate about the reasonable inferences to be drawn from the available facts. But none of us are entitled to our own facts. We cannot allow lying to become normalized. We must oppose it with all the energy we can muster. Lying strikes at the heart of trust. And without trust we have nothing.

We have the power to change the course of our character. Exercise of that power must be through both our words and our actions. The American Heritage Dictionary defines “character” as “moral or ethical strength, integrity, fortitude.” In a sense, character is who we are at our core. It’s what determines what we believe and how we choose to respond in any given situation. Good character is not something we are born with, nor does it develop automatically—it must be consciously developed. Nor is it something that is static. Whether you are 50 or 15, 5 or 75..., a corporate leader, a BestPrep supporter, volunteer or student, or a former Supreme Court Justice, we will be forced to re-evaluate and renew our character again and again.

People of character take responsibility for who they are and what they do. To resist the pressures and temptations that seduce us... to make the easy choices rather than the right choices... to be a person of character... takes a strong person. I don’t mean strong in the physical sense, for physical stature has nothing to do with character. I do mean “strong” in the sense of believing that each of us has an obligation to act in a way that builds, rather than diminishes, our character and the character of those around us, especially the children around us.

That means we must be honest and trustworthy—saying what we mean and meaning what we say. It means keeping our promises, playing fairly, telling the truth, making decisions with others in mind, always treating people with respect, and respecting ourselves. It means working to figure out the difference between right and wrong, and then doing what is right.

The fact that I was once considered to be a great football player or that I was a Supreme Court Justice doesn't, by itself, mean I am a man of good character. The fact that the color of my skin may be different from yours doesn't mean that I am not a man of good character. The fact that your language or religion may be different from mine doesn't make either one of our characters better or worse. The outward differences, which identify us as individuals, do not define the content of our character. That will be defined on an ongoing basis by how we act, especially when no one is watching.

Let me close with these thoughts. We can change the future. When we put our hearts, our minds, and our bodies to the task of ensuring educational opportunity and positive character development we can bend the arc of history toward hope, opportunity, and a more just world. That is the challenge we face.

Thank you.