

Middlebury College Commencement Address

by William E. Strickland Jr.

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I am very honored to be here as commencement speaker for Middlebury College. The fact that I was selected as commencement speaker given my background and life circumstances, is in itself a beacon of hope. Once upon a time, I was an inner-city public school student, failing academically and totally adrift and was lucky enough to meet an art teacher named Frank Ross who was an accomplished potter. I saw him make a ceramic vessel in class one day and it was a defining moment and magical experience that altered my life permanently. At the end of that year, Mr. Ross took a job at a local university and declared that he was not going to leave me behind to die on the streets like a lot of my friends. He drove me out to the University of Pittsburgh and insisted I fill out a college application, and I was admitted as a probationary student because I failed the S.A.T. tests – never having seen it before. Well, I am very pleased to tell you that not only did I graduate from the University of Pittsburgh, with honors, I am now a trustee of that university and was the commencement speaker in front of 13,000 people and got up and said, “Do not give up on the poor kids. They might end up being the commencement speaker one day.” And it is that story that underscores a number of deep concerns that I have about the current state of public education in our country. And that includes every state in the union and my home state the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Fifteen years ago, when I began to look more

critically at the educational system beyond Pittsburgh and the state of Pennsylvania, at that point the public school system across America and in my own community was at a point of virtual collapse. I still believe that this is the case and if it is possible to imagine such a condition, the problem has gotten worse.

Dropout rates in most urban centers were averaging 30 percent for minorities and closing in on percent for white students. Today, the dropout rate is 50 percent for black and Hispanic students across the country. Literacy levels and computational skills have regressed and child-rearing centers are appearing in schools, while art programs are being closed or defunded. Metal detectors are now standard operating practice in most urban schools. In my own city, metal detectors are permanent fixtures. They are the first thing that greets students in the morning along with cameras and steel grey doors! In two instances, two of those high schools once led the nation in national merit scholars with many students scoring perfectly on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests or S.A.T.'s. What now exists are guards, metal detectors and fear as the basis for the provision of education. In a recent incident at one of those schools children were at the point of a full scale riot. Tragically, in most urban schools this has become the norm and not the exception. In other words, schools resemble places of incarceration rather than places of hope. One would think that I am describing a place from hell itself; but in fact, I am describing one school district, in only one city and a school district that now has capable executive leadership and a superintendent determined to make a positive

difference but it is uphill at the way. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of situations and school districts that are much worse and in some instances have totally collapsed. The net result of these failures can be measured in the lives lost, the productivity that is lost due to the thousands of children who will not have a contributing role in industry, commerce or their community. In other words, they will not be assets in any sense of the word. On the liability side, it is or should be obvious that children who fail to graduate from school and achieve the basic life skills of reading, math and language are condemned to a life of high unemployment, transient lifestyle, and broken families, often accompanied with alcohol, drug abuse and domestic violence. The costs on the liability side relative to lost possibilities are enormous. But the cost of policing, incarceration, emergency medical care and life subsidy is almost beyond calculation. We as a nation are spending on police power, medical assistance and life income subsidies more than the budgets of whole nations on our planet. In Pennsylvania, it costs approximately \$40,000 per year to keep a person in jail; substantially equal to or higher than the tuition of many major universities. In Pennsylvania, the average private school tuition is about \$17,000 per year, which in the case of my public school system is actually lower than the cost for a student enrolled in that school system. I can assure you that if a 50 percent dropout rate occurred in the average private school in Pennsylvania, the headmaster would be immediately dismissed, the board of that school dismantled, and new administrative leadership put into

place. We experience similar numbers in public education and no one seems to notice. There are no emergency bulletins on the television news and no march on the board of education from these communities; everyone sleeps soundly as if everything is alright. I would like to suggest that things are not alright and I would predict that the net result of the collective neglect of our public schools and its children will have significant and possibly catastrophic implications on our lives if something is not done to arrest this problem. Communities that have dysfunctional schools are themselves ultimately dysfunctional. Companies become reluctant to move to communities whose schools are not up to par. Property values tend to stay below market because the investment climate is compromised. The psychological process of a negative self-image creates an environment that becomes a cancer out of control. The good news is that the conditions and circumstances that I have been describing are capable of remediation. Communities can have schools that work, that are cost effective, that operate in an environment of promise and hope. The reason I know this is true is because I run a school that is successful at educating students from poverty circumstances and a school that is creating a climate of hope and safety rather than one of fear and failure. When I arrived at the Bidwell Training Center some 40 years ago, it was a dysfunctional vocational school with poor management, low morale, a non-existent board and students unable to compete. Prior to assuming the Bidwell role, I had founded a program entitled Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, an inner city arts and education program

modeled after my own life. Manchester Craftsmen's Guild took clay and photography and used them as tools to rebuild the lives of kids who had been pushed aside. To this day, my work with the arts and those children continues with extraordinary success. My first gesture at Bidwell in 1972, on the other hand, was to literally paint the entire building. I bought the paint and the beer and instructed anyone who did not participate would not have a job when the painting was completed. I am pleased to say that I experienced 99% staff cooperation in this first act of reclamation. I had decided to take control of the circumstances, and not be defined by those circumstances. I had decided that we were going to become something and not experience the fate of similar programs in the past. At Bidwell, I went out to employers and asked them what they needed in an employee before we started to teach the course, a common sense solution but one that is very rarely adopted by most educational institutions. I challenge you to ask most urban public school administrators when they have sat down with employers and developed a joint curriculum; it does not happen. So in my view, I can understand why there is almost no relationship between what school does and what the employer and the market place need. The solution to this dilemma does not require an advanced degree in education to accomplish. It requires initiative and a desire to do the right thing. Over the years with this industry/Bidwell partnership, our students were able to construct the cable system for the City of Pittsburgh and in the process created 50 highly skilled technicians, many of whom remain leaders in the field of

cable and information technology to this day. Using the cable industry model, Bidwell was able to form partnerships in medical technology, computer science, chemical technology, culinary arts, the travel industry and the financial community. Today, Bidwell takes students who are poor and dysfunctional and within 12 months are capable of performing at a level beyond industry standards in the vast majority of the cases. In some cases, these are students with high school diplomas that they are unable to read. By creating an environment of hope and creating physical space that reflects the human imagination and assembling teachers who live those convictions, we can train poor people to be successful in virtually any industry that we are given an opportunity to be a part of.

In the case of the Bayer Corporation, a world leader in chemical analysis and manufacturing, we have for over a 10-year period taken inner city, out of work, disadvantaged people and made them fully functioning and certified chemical lab technicians in 10 months flat. When one visits our school, you will see poor, working class mothers doing analytical chemistry and using logarithmic calculators within one year after enrollment in our school. We presently have more than 40 research technicians working for Bayer at its Pittsburgh facilities. Once having demonstrated to Bayer that we could exceed its expectations and really train capable people who require no apology. Other chemical companies followed suit, and we now have trained technicians for PPG, Calgon Carbon, BASF, Aristech,

Nova Chemical, Alcoa, just to cite a few. These technicians are also finding opportunities with medical laboratories at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and the West Penn Allegheny Health System. Once an environment of performance is established, and a culture based on achievement and value, education is embraced. The school and its faculty have become accustomed to high-powered market oriented education that is now geared toward life enhancing strategies. It is my absolute belief that a substantial majority of our children would perform at a much higher level of interest and sophistication if schools adopted a career focus in addition to basic academic education. I do not believe that there is any value added to having a young person enroll in college because they cannot do anything else in life. I believe that there is dignity in vocation. At Bidwell, we have eliminated the stigma often associated with vocational education. We have made it desirable to be able to earn a good living. Given the thousands of jobs just in Pittsburgh alone that are going unfilled due to the almost total absence of industry driven education, I believe that it is well within our ability to offer creative, life enhancing environments from which many thousands of students would be effectively employed and become contributing members of the community.

The other half of my life involves the use of the arts as a strategy for educating inner city kids. The program entitled Manchester Craftsmen's Guild,

operates on the belief that every child has the potential for achievement. The program is co-located with Bidwell Training Center in world-class facilities that offer state of the art materials and equipment, a faculty that cares about the students and an environment that assumes that everyone can learn. Last year 90 percent of the students polled had gone on to college and we have averaged significant outcomes with this population for the last 15 years. These were kids designated as potential failures and unable to learn. People respond to their environment! In other words if you build a school with metal bars, metal detectors, cameras, and steel doors, people will act like prisoners. If you build schools that stress learning and excellence and look that way, you will achieve results very similar to what we have experienced in Pittsburgh. There is no advanced degree required for achieving the impact on children I have just described; but it does require passion, a zeal and insistence on doing things right as opposed to doing them wrong. At the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, we also have a jazz presenting program in which we bring the world's greatest jazz artists to a concert hall in the middle of the inner city. Artists from Dizzy Gillespie and Herbie Hancock and Nancy Wilson have come to play to sold out audiences in the middle of a neighborhood that everyone gave up on for dead. Each artist who has come has been very supportive of our work and in many instances allowed our center to record them as a contribution to our educational archives. The jazz program was conceived of as both a recapturing of an important Pittsburgh cultural

tradition, but also as a means of presenting world-class artists in an environment that their music demanded. In the case of Dizzy Gillespie for example, I asked Mr. Gillespie why would he take the time to come to a minority-run arts and education center that at the time had no reputation for music of any kind. Dizzy replied that he had heard about the center from Dr. Billy Taylor, a world-class jazz educator and performer who was and is a good friend. Dizzy remarked that he did not believe that a center of this description existed on the planet run by a black person and he wanted to see for himself if it were true. He then said, "I am so taken with what you have accomplished here that I want to leave a gift for you. The gift is my permission to record this concert and I will give you the rights to the music as my contribution to your effort." "Someday the music may have some value, and I wanted it to be known for all time that I was here." We recorded Dizzy and he died several years later. But not before he told Joe Williams, Monty Alexander, Stanley Turrentine, Tito Puente, Carmen McRae, Betty Carter and Shirley Horn about our work, just to name a few. In the vast majority of cases, we not only recorded the artists, we recorded them in sold out venues in the middle of the inner city. These artists came to love the mission of the school as I suspected they would. In a very special instance our center was able to convert the music of the Count Basie Orchestra to a jazz CD that won us a Grammy Award in New York. We received a second Grammy nomination for our recording of the U.N. Jazz Orchestra, back to back. The outcome of all this is that our organization created its

own jazz label, which has generated substantial revenue to assist in the operation of our program. Just at Dizzy had hoped.

Today it is our hope to build centers like this across our country and eventually around the world.

Given what I have come to know about Middlebury College, many of you have been well educated, both academically and in social values. This is a school that cares about its students and the community surrounding it, which is why I felt particularly drawn to the invitation to address the graduating class. I hope that in some way many of you will join me in the effort to reverse the drift in our country and allow it to regain world leadership in education, economic innovation and the improvement of the living condition for the chronically poor. Many of the nonprofits I have known and worked with do incredible work to try and relieve the suffering of the physically challenged, children drowning in poverty and deprivation, and families in need of food, shelter and clothing. They are often doing God's work on very little money and less by way of encouragement; but our country is enormously blessed to have them doing what they do often times with enormous personal sacrifice.

Understandably many graduating today will go on to pursue lucrative and successful careers and I wish you every opportunity to do so; but I will also ask that as you begin to organize your life's priorities beyond graduation that you consider joining me in my work by sitting on the board of local nonprofits, women's shelters, homeless programs, food kitchens or literacy programs trying to teach young people to read. Regardless of where you end up, you will be close to these problems and I hope you do not cast a blank stare at these opportunities to help people who are at such severe limitations. So, I can assume that your life will be much fuller, your communities will be immeasurably better off and you can have a direct hand in re-building the United States of America, one person at a time, one community at a time.

I would like to thank the trustees and administration of Middlebury College for their gracious invitation to speak and wish all the graduates my very best wishes for your life and career in the months and years to come.

Thank you.