

5-7-2011

Bonnie Gray's Commencement Speech

Bonnie Gray
Eastern Kentucky University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://encompass.eku.edu/commencements>

Recommended Citation

Gray, Bonnie, "Bonnie Gray's Commencement Speech" (2011). *Commencements*. Paper 1.
<http://encompass.eku.edu/commencements/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Events at Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Commencements by an authorized administrator of Encompass. For more information, please contact Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu.

Members of the Board of Regents, President Whitlock, Members of the Faculty and Staff, Parents and Friends of our Graduates, and most importantly, members of the 2011 graduating Class:

I am overwhelmed with gratitude to have been given this Honorary Doctorate from the University I love dearly and the University where I spent my entire professional career. And I am very humbled by this honor since I know that much of the success of the ECU Honors Program was not achieved by my work alone. The development of the ECU Honors Program has been a collaborative effort on the part of my faculty colleagues, and of many administrators like President Whitlock. And I would be very amiss if I did not acknowledge the key role that our financial donors, like Jane and Charles Boyer, have made to the success of this Program. So, to all of the many people who helped to make the Honors Program the successful program it is today, I am accepting this Honorary Doctorate on behalf of all of us.

As I thought about what to say to you graduates, the task was made even more daunting when I thought back to my own graduation from college and realized that I could not remember who the speaker was, or anything he or she said on that important day in my life. This realization was followed by the thought that perhaps I should make only one important point, backed up by such scintillating examples that it would be unforgettable. I will call this a successful speech if in a few years, heck, in a few hours or days, you can remember this one main point.

So, here is the one most important point I want you to remember. An extremely important quality that will serve you well throughout your entire life is the quality of GUMPTION. I suppose some of you know what gumption is and some of you do not know what it means or how a person might develop it. I would venture to say that all college graduates, including all of you sitting out there today, must have some gumption whether you know it, or whether you have ever consciously thought about this quality before. So what is gumption? Listen carefully to this definition.

Gumption is the internal strength of will which enables a person to take the required initiative to complete a fairly difficult and significant task. And what would count as a "fairly difficult task" will vary from person to person. Something I might find difficult, you might find easy and vice versa. I would venture to say that for all of you graduates, completing all of the requirements for the degree you will receive today, took a lot of gumption. All of those challenging degree requirements were put before you, yet you all found enough gumption, that internal strength of will, necessary to complete them.

Let me give you an example of gumption from my own life. Ultimately I want each of you to think about the important moments in your own life, when you had to call on gumption in order to get an important task completed. It usually turns out that an

important instance of gumption will lead to some very significant accomplishments in our lives which require even more gumption. Here's an example from my own life when finding enough gumption was a key factor in taking advantage of a once in a life time opportunity, which in turn led to other important events.

This example of gumption happened when I was 15 years old and completing my sophomore year of high school in the very small village of 1000 people in rural Upstate New York where I grew up. Like many of you, I came from a very small town and like many of you, I had not traveled very far from home. In February of my sophomore year, a representative of a foreign exchange program came to our school to offer us the chance to spend the upcoming summer in a country in South America. I listened very intently as this spokesperson pointed out some of the advantages of participating in such a program. This promotional speech ended with the point that no one from my school, Alexandria Central School, had ever participated in such an exchange program before. Well, that kind of point has always captured my attention as I have always been drawn to try things that no one has ever done before. Needless to say I left school that day very excited and thinking I wanted to be the first person from my school to take advantage of this opportunity to travel and study in a foreign country. When I shared this that evening with my parents at dinner, my father was very excited about it (you see my father almost always sided with me), but my mother was horrified at the thought of sending her only child so very far away for three months. I worked and worked on my mother until the last day came when the applications and deposits were due, and FINALLY in a moment of weakness, she signed my application form giving her consent for my participation. Once the application and deposit were submitted, it did not take long for my acceptance letter to come back in the mail assigning me to the small city of Bucaramanga, high in the mountains of Colombia, South America.

On the morning of my departure, I woke up with a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach. In just a few hours, I would be headed for Bucaramanga, Colombia via Miami and Bogota. I realized that no one I knew would be on that airplane and I would be away from home and my parents for almost three months which seemed like an eternity to a 15 year old. And to make matters worse, I had never flown on an airplane before and did not speak Spanish. When we arrived at the Buffalo airport and checked my luggage and got down to the gate, I was really questioning whether I wanted to go, much to my mother's delight. She kept saying, "now honey, if you do not want to go on this trip, it is perfectly fine". Well, I am here to tell you that I was the last one to board that airplane, and I walked backwards all of the way from the gate to the door of the airplane while watching my parents get smaller and smaller in the window of the airport. Somehow I managed to find enough gumption to board that airplane and thereby set in motion the events of a wonderful summer as well as other significant events in my life which would not have been possible without this very trip, complete with the amount of gumption required to make it happen.

I know that this summer trip to a city so far away from home was why I was able to choose to attend Hope College, a small liberal arts college in Western Michigan, some 650 miles from home knowing that once I arrived on campus for my first semester, I would not be able to return home until the holiday break in late December. And I know that summer trip and my four years at Hope College were significant factors in why I was able to accept a job offer at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Kentucky some 800 miles away from my hometown. Each time I needed gumption, my inner tank had enough of the required internal strength of will and initiative to accomplish the task at hand.

At this point, there are many other questions we could ask and ponder about gumption. Those who want to pursue some of these questions should read the book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig. How does gumption develop and why is it that some people have more gumption than others? The short answer is that gumption develops from a number of factors including your family and its values, your other main support systems like friends and religion, your self esteem, and your formal education. Let's think briefly about the role education plays.

As we think about the nature of the professions you will likely pursue as graduates of the College of Health Sciences or the College of Justice and Safety, it becomes immediately clear that you will need a lot of gumption to tackle the life saving, and often personally dangerous tasks, you will be required to do. For example, as an emergency room nurse, you will likely be called upon to work as part of a medical team trying to save a victim of a violent car crash. As the leader of a fire fighting unit, you will be called upon to make decisions which have the potential to save the lives of people trapped in a burning building, but decisions which will put the men and women under your command in danger. What should give you confidence that you will have the required gumption to complete these kinds of tasks is the education you received at ECU while earning that diploma you will receive today. The ER nurse will have practiced the procedures necessary to save the life of a critically injured car accident victim over and over again until Health Care professionals were convinced that completing those procedures correctly had become second nature. And the same is true of our fire safety graduates. You know how to use the equipment necessary to protect your safety while you are in harm's way trying to save the lives of others. You too have practiced and practiced these maneuvers. You have all been thoroughly educated and you all know your stuff.

As much as I would like to continue talking about other aspects of gumption, I know my time is up and so I must bring these remarks to a close. My final remarks to you graduates are these: may the amount of gumption you need to complete important professional and personal tasks in your lives always be available in your inner tank. Have the confidence that the education you have received at Eastern Kentucky University will serve as the solid foundation for any amount of gumption you will need.

Keep seeking more education as it will be a very important factor in ensuring that you will always have gumption when you need it. So, if anyone were to ask you the main point made by the speaker at your college graduation, you would be quick to say, she said we should have what ? (Gumption)

I wish you all success, happiness, and good health as you begin the next phase of your lives. Thank you very much for your attention.

Commencement Address given at the 5:30 ceremony on May 7, 2011
by Dr. Bonnie Gray, Recipient of an Honorary Degree from ECU on that occasion