Commencement Address

Chancellor DiStefano, President Benson, and the Regents of the University I am honored to be here, thank you.

Thank you, Chancellor for all the nice things you just said about me. You’d make a great wingman.

And, congratulations to the honorary degree recipients.

It’s true, sweet angel Chad Brokaw, your senior class president, as well as the senior class council, invited a 27-year-old here today to share with you the wisdom of the ages.

Well the truth is, I can’t give you the wisdom of all ages, but I can give you the wisdom of our ages. As in, ages 21-27.

If you want to know what the first six years after you graduate from college are like, and how to survive them, you should perk up for this part of the program. Because I’m here with the tea.

And I’m really good at giving advice so prepare yourself. For example, when I was asked to give this commencement address, I advised myself to do the following things in this exact order:

1. Number one: Call mom and dad. Scream cry together.

2. Number two: Have a panic attack. Somewhere between moderate and severe. Totally up to you. Repeat as desired.

3. Number three: Say yes. Worst case scenario, you’ll embarrass yourself in a way that is permanent on the internet. It’s fine. You’ll be fine.

4. Number four: Reward yourself by ordering New York’s finest: Domino’s, eating the entire pizza with a side of ranch and garlic sauce by yourself. Seriously, their rebrand and addition of the garlic crust was fire.

After that, I found that googling helps.

I found Kurt Vonnegut’s commencement speech. He said, “If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it.” Which, I mean, fair.

Oprah gave one where she said, “Failure is just life trying to move us in another direction.” Which is easy to say if you’re Oprah.
Stephen Colbert made the point that if we all followed our first dreams, the world would be ruled by cowboys and princesses. Which, let’s be honest, is sort of what’s happening now.

Let’s just say I watched and read a lot of these. And there are some key themes that come through.

Just about everyone tries to convince the graduates that they should chase their dreams no matter what. And I agree with that. And you should.

But what’s missing from that advice is what I want to focus on today. Yes, chase your dreams. But just to be clear: Chasing your dreams is often going to feel like a nightmare. Got that? A freaking nightmare.

Chasing dreams for me has been learning to respond to the previous assistant’s name. It took one boss months to learn my name wasn’t Courtney. Chasing dreams has been ordering hundreds of the tuna and greens sandwich for my boss where I had to ask to hold the greens and the bread. So, that’s just a pile of tuna. Chasing dreams has been feeling really, really trapped and like I maybe messed everything up.

Try putting that on an inspirational poster.

But the thing is, when things are feeling really tedious and frustrating, even hopeless, those aren’t signs you’re on the wrong path. They’re signs you’re on the right path.

Here’s what it comes down to:

You’re about to be college graduates and I’m sure you’ve all got dreams you’re ready to chase.

One of the things you’re going to find in life is that if your dreams are relatively easy to achieve, they might not be big enough.

The flip side of that is that if you’re dreaming big enough, chasing your dream is going to be hard. It means your journey is going to have a lot of missteps and dead ends, a lot of near wins and hard losses. It should be scary and make you question if it’s possible and induce meltdowns and sometimes it might even make you wish you wanted something different for your life.

But listen, I didn’t come here today to give you some real talk and leave you hanging. If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the past 6 years, it’s that success depends on how well you cope with what’s hard.

So, I’ve got some tips for you about how to do that, learned through trial and error and error and error.

Tip #1: when the impostor syndrome knocks on your door, punch it in the face.
Imposter syndrome is the inner voice that says, ‘you shouldn’t be here,’ ‘you can’t do it,’ ‘you aren’t good enough,’ ‘you aren’t old enough’ or ‘you’re not smart enough or experienced enough.’ Sometimes you’ll even hear it out loud from others. Like the media executive who told me it was “ridiculous” that I was asked to deliver a commencement address here at my alma mater.

I sort of imagine my imposter syndrome like that creepy booger from the Mucinex commercial in the too small tank top. And you just want to be like, “dude, shut up! Move on with your life!”

It’s so easy to listen to that voice. It’s so easy to think that it’s telling you the truth.

I had the opportunity to interview former Vice President Joe Biden for NBC. The imposter syndrome guy was so loud that day that I literally threw up in the TODAY show bathroom 5 minutes before we started.

I knew I was going to ask the mandatory questions of a former VP. But also, I just really wanted to know what he thought about all those Obama Biden memes. But I almost didn’t ask that. I thought, people won’t take me seriously if I do. People will think, of course she asked that she’s the Snapchat girl, of course she asked that, she’s so young. That was the imposter syndrome trying to throw me off my game.

I ignored that voice and I took my time getting the former VP on the record about DACA and the current administration, and then I handed him an iPad full of Obama Biden memes. The VP laughed and went through every single one with me, revealing a part of himself the public rarely sees. that part of the interview is what got the biggest response because that moment was unexpected, and it came about because I was true to myself.

I want you to enter the world knowing that your age and whatever else is unique about you can be your superpower! You guys are entering a world where young people are the ones making the things we use. Building companies from the ground up, changing the narrative in DC, creating completely new platforms and forms of technology that inform how the world works. And also, you have permission to dream your dreams at any age! And I’m here to tell you, you can achieve them faster than other people say you can.

When you doubt that, that’s the imposter syndrome. Here’s a little secret: the imposter syndrome can’t ever be entirely killed. But it can be managed.

Don’t ever let it stop you. Don’t ever trust what it’s telling you. It’s an internet troll. And you know what they say: Don’t feed the trolls.

Tip #2: Find a corporate side hustle. I think I just ruined that term by putting the word ‘corporate’ in there but hear me out.
No matter where you end up, I highly recommend you try to work at a place where you can see what you want to be. For me, that meant that I could have been cleaning the floors at 30 Rock. It didn’t matter. I was at NBC News. I could see who I wanted to be. And I could do everything in my power to inch myself toward my goals.

Let me give you an example: One of my first jobs was as an executive assistant at MSNBC. I knew I wanted to be a reporter, and though the job was mainly about coffee runs and scheduling meetings, I could see what the people with my dream jobs were doing. I learned how it worked. I learned what it would take.

So, I worked on a side hustle.

At first, that meant doing some things a lot of other people didn’t want to do like working on digital projects no one liked and web series going nowhere. Eventually I learned that the weekend team was often short-staffed and needed some extra reporting help on the weekends. And boy did I raise my hand for that opportunity, and I was ready and willing to do whatever was asked.

Over time, I started to have two clearly defined roles at the company. On the weekends, I was the new-girl reporter, grouped in with the other correspondents. I was one of them. But by Monday, I was back to Savannah the assistant. No, my name’s not Courtney. No bread with the tuna.

But in time, the side hustle became the main hustle. I became Savannah the reporter. Savannah the co-host. And it never would have happened if I hadn’t worked really hard to find opportunities not listed in my job description.

Alright tip #3: When your dream is feeling like a nightmare, you’re going to need help. You need the good people you’ve got in your life. Your family and your friends.

It’s the friendships in your life that make chasing your dreams sustainable. They make the nightmare moments bearable.

Now my dad didn’t buy me a spot on the USC crew team or the Georgetown tennis team or pay someone to take my SAT. Thank God. But he did get me out of Will Ville and into Farrand. He’s that guy. And thank goodness he did. Sorry Will Villers. Because that meant I met Paige, my random roommate freshman year. Get this: I still live with Paige except instead of the second floor of Farrand, it’s an apartment in Manhattan. I think we’re common law married now. We live with our other best friend and Chi Omega sister Kelsey. And by the way we have one bathroom. Three girls, one bathroom. True love. This, among other things, probably makes me the only commencement speaker in America this year who still has two roommates.
We talk about all the real stuff going on. Between them and my sister Rilee who is also a Buff and with us in New York, we are pretty much always discussing which one of us is going through a quarter life crisis; which by the way is a real thing.

You have got to have that circle of people around you so when it’s hard, you’re not fighting alone. I pretty much have regularly scheduled meltdowns and I have those best friends and I have a therapist.

I was just in another one of my best friends and sorority sisters’ wedding this past year. And sadly, just a couple of months later, I stood with that same best friend at her younger brother’s funeral. That friend of mine is Chelsea Giger. I’m sure many of you knew and loved Danny Giger, who would have been here in this stadium graduating today but God called him home earlier than we were all expecting. We can all take some lessons from Danny. Danny lived the life he wanted. He created it for himself. And Danny was that guy that knew everyone and invested in everyone. Danny loved the people around him hard.

The people around you will sweeten your victories because they’re there to celebrate and they’ll soften your defeats because they’re there to comfort you. Make the effort and let them be part of your story.

Ok, tip #4: when you can find meaning in the work you’re doing, your dreams will shift in ways you didn’t anticipate.

Look, my dream has always been to do the news. It wasn’t until this specific role that a new dimension of that dream was revealed to me. I’ve found that my favorite part of my job - better than any rush I get from live TV or celebrity I’m lucky enough to interview - is when young viewers of our Snapchat show stop me to say they never watched the news before they found Stay Tuned. They didn’t have interest in current events or politics until they found someone who spoke to them in a way they appreciated and could follow and that made them feel like it was OK to not know everything. I’ve had teachers download Snapchat just to message me to thank me because their social studies class knew about the crisis in Myanmar because of our show. Now, nothing makes me jump out of bed in the morning, but that comes pretty close.

Alright, my last tip for you may be the most important of them all.

Tip #5: Remember when you wanted what you have right now.

This is honestly one of the only things that makes me feel better when I’m feeling stuck.

There’s nothing like pursuing your dreams to make you forget how much you’ve achieved along the way. And there’s always going to be the next thing that you’re going to pray for and think “as soon as I have that, that’s when I’ll be happy.”
Two years ago, when someone said to me, you’re going to host your own news show on Snapchat, I thought, “this is it! I’ve made it!”

A year ago, when someone said to me, you’re going to start reporting for the TODAY show, I thought, “wait, now I’ve made it!”

Yet a lot of days I still find myself wondering what’s next? We’re always challenging ourselves for an encore. And to an extent, that’s good and motivating and ambitious. But every now and then, you have to tap the brakes and enjoy the present. Call your parents. Make time for your friends. Eat a cheeseburger. Have some wine, lots of wine. And remember when what you’ve got is all you thought you could ever want.

That can start today by remembering when all you ever wanted was no more homework and no more finals. That’s over! And you did it!

And don’t forget to thank your parents and families today for their support and, for some of them, for the nightmare that is paying for you to go to college. Thank you, mom and dad, right over there. And happy birthday mom! Yes, today is actually her birthday.

Class of 2019, congratulations! Go out and do big things. I can’t wait to watch. Give ‘em hell. And don’t forget to wear sunscreen.