

## **EHH COMMENCEMENT SPEECH TO ELLIS**

**And now, how can I teach you anything?**

**In the usual way, I must say to all the important people here tonight...the graduating class, the other students, family, friends and, so importantly, your Head Mistress, the Board of Trustees of the Ellis School, and, most importantly, the teachers and staff who have nurtured whatever little or big spark they could find in you to bring you to the successful conclusion of your basic high school education and have, through their perseverance and yours, challenged you to the next wonderful phase of your life....whatever that might be....I extend my thanks for being allowed to participate this evening with you all.**

**To the graduating class, one little special notice: I know from old age that it is more fun to listen to escapades of days gone by rather than dry speech material about what might happen and, anyway, it's more fun to tell them! Tonight, you only get 2 stories, so, in years to come, please invite me back to your reunion and we'll share some more....and you can tell me yours!!**

**While preparing these remarks today, I looked up the two words “commencement” and “graduation” – wondering why they were so unique to these occasions. Neither struck me as perfect! Commencement, according to**

the dictionary, is the act or fact of beginning, which seems to make a mockery of what you thought you were doing when you were beginning kindergarten ,and graduation is just a simple fact of receiving or conferring an academic degree and that word says only “you’re pretty smart and you’ve gotten through twelve years of school – you now have your high school diploma.”

I believe we should rename the whole process and call it “A Celebration of Optimism” – my interpretation of which is “I’m On My Happy Way Even If I don’t Know Exactly Where I’m Going.” Doesn’t that sound like a lot more fun than just now beginning or ending quite so soon?”

One’s remarks on such occasions as this are pretty shallow and meaningless to both the speaker and the listener if they are not based on some personal experience or contain some indication of personal ambitions or dreams. As I admonish a little later in my remarks that you be true to yourselves, so then, I have to start by confessing that...to get where you are tonight.....it took me thirteen years instead of the usual twelve!!

I will share with you life’s darkest moment. Sixty one years ago, just about now, I had finished my junior year...or so I thought. On a particularly bright June day, I was being brought home by my favorite boyfriend of the summer to get my bathing suit and some clothes for further fun and games at the Fox Chapel pool. As we approached the gate on Old Mill Road.....some of you may know of it....down near the bend, there is a

lovely little spring house and pond. My older brother was sitting on the gate post waiting for me. As he waved us down, he said “El, Dad’s home from the office waiting for you.” Obviously, I panicked. As much as I loved my father, he didn’t come home to see me in the afternoons on sunny June days! I asked “What’s up?” My brother said, “Your report came and you flunked five out of six subjects for the year!”

Why is that story so important? It’s important because I was one of those people who had to be given a second chance. I needed new direction, and I was given and took both. Though I can claim only one year of music college, I stand before you tonight holding nine honorary degrees...shared between Humane Letters and an Honorary Doctor of Laws.

I want to inject one other funny story about me and the Pittsburgh College Club. For a number of years, I was invited to meet with the members of the Pittsburgh College Club to talk with them and review with them whatever the current election in the City, County, State or National we were experiencing. I always worked with them and enjoyed my meetings with them and they seemed to be satisfied, as I was invited back for a number of years. However, at the end of one sessions, as we were going to lunch and I was seated next to the President at the time, I was asked sort of curiously by the President why I had never made any effort to become a member of the College Club when, indeed, they had offered me such hospitality for so many

years. Well...I had to confess that I wasn't qualified.....that I had never gone to college. The cat was out of the bag! It would interest you to know...and it makes me laugh to this day....that was the last time I was invited to speak to the group, and sadly enough, The College Club does not exist today.

However, since that time, and even before that time, I worked hard at trying to be a productive person...perhaps, though, not a genius! But how much easier life would have been for me had I grown up when I was a kid and had gotten myself to the point where my optimism and my academic achievements could have come together at an earlier age....such as yours has. My honorary degrees that I am so proud of took me fifty-five years to get. You can do it in six or eight!!

For one moment, I must be serious as today's world demands so much more of you than it did 60-65 years ago for my generation.

Being a physicist...a doctor....a lawyer.....or a teacher.... was just not there for me. I decided that music would be my career, but that wasn't there either. I really hadn't thought much about marriage, but I fell in love and was married at nineteen to a man from Pittsburgh, which I had sworn I would never do! My life had seemed a series of false starts and stops...exasperating to me as well as to my parents, even though I was having a lot of fun.

**But today, life is different! What has grown in you through your wonderful academic Ellis experience is not only curiosity, but knowledge. You have learned moral values....science, the arts, languages and had your eyes and brains open to facts and suggestions. You each have become a person of value beyond just that of a child, and this preparation has prepared you to move on with this experience. A college degree is a part of an educated person's life today. A master's degree and real doctorate programs elevate you to the top of whichever pile you want to climb.....not just to financial reimbursement and accomplishment, but because you will become a better and stronger person....ready to serve an important role in a complicated world! People like me could not get a job today if my papers were compared to yours!**

**So, it is important to reach out to the next level if it is appropriate for you. And, if love reaches into your life, don't lose that either. To love and be loved really tells you who you are! Even I must have been making some forward motion...optimistic always.....knowing that tomorrow would be another good day...with accomplishment to some degree and love! I try not to have bad days. They are either great....good....or less good!**

**What makes me happy about being here with you tonight is that we are all together – living testaments – to the fact that the world continues to offer each one of us new directions. You are academic achievers, deservedly proud**

of what you've done, but I trust that some of you are questioning the next step...whether it's the right or wrong one to take....whether it's what your life's dream is all about....or whether it's an ideal of your mother's or father's for you. It's scary, unless you can bring to it that optimism – “I'm on my happy way, though I'm not sure exactly where I'm going.” That does not mean that you are unfocused or rudderless. It just means that you are heading into new experiences which will, in themselves, change as you grow in them. You are aimed somewhere, but your goal may not be just as you had envisioned it. If I can leave just one or two thoughts with you tonight, they are these:

Go forth from this place that has been so much a part of your life with pride in your heritage and your achievement. You have had wonderful experiences here. The process itself of academic achievement has enriched your life more than you know. Let it continue....not just stored on a memory shelf some place. Treat your moral values and your personal ethics with due diligence, and resolve to make this world a better place to live...if not for everybody, then, at least, for somebody. Try to keep two things that are uniquely yours...open at all times...your heart and your mind. They are two vessels of your body that never fill all the way. There is always room for one more person to

**like or to love and always one more idea to improve the quality of a project or a life.**

**Don't be stingy. Share with others what you know and what you find if it's good. Remember, too, that it's the size of your heart that matters the most. Tonight, for instance, if it has been in your heart but not within your courage somehow.....tell a particular teacher, staff member, a friend or a family member how very much he or she has meant to you over the years, and how that person has helped to make your life richer. Tonight would be a perfect time to do so! You will feel so proud of yourself...so very happy to be able to express just this simple honesty and you will bring joy into the life of another. You are not islands, dear ones. You have important places in the lives of those around you. Respond to them with good humor and tender loving care. You will find that way....a full and happy life...and I congratulate you on this "Celebration of Optimism" ....a glorious occasion for you all. My reward is being able to share it with you!**

**With lots of love.....Bon Voyage!!**