

Suffolk University College of Arts & Sciences
Class of 2023 Commencement
Sunday, May 21, 2023
Leader Bank Pavilion
Commencement Speaker
Martin J. Walsh

It only took me 33 years to get a degree from Suffolk University. [LAUGHTER] Let me first of all thank you, Mr. Chairman and the board of trustees for this honor. President Kelly, Provost Sandell, Dean Sparks, Professor Alison, and all the faculty, thank you very much for this honor. I want to thank Professor Alison, because half of my speech was in his notes. So I don't know what I'm going to do up here right now, but I appreciate you for that. To the alumni, distinguished guests,

[00:30] but most of all, the Suffolk University College of Arts & Science Class of 2023. Thank you for inviting me here. Thank you for having me part of this special day for you. It's a privilege for me to be with you, and from the bottom of my heart, congratulations to all of you. [APPLAUSE] And I know there are a lot of proud families here. As I was walking in on this side, I saw a lot of mothers and fathers

[01:00] and grandmothers and friends and boyfriends and girlfriends—nervous, fiddling for their phones, to make sure they get the picture of you coming down the aisle. And those of you that walked down this aisle, and the families on this side, hopefully you'll see them on the way out the door this way. So I want to congratulate you. I know that your families are proud of you. I certainly know your professors are proud of you. I heard them talking about it last night. And I heard them talking about it today backstage. The teachers in your hometown are proud of you. The teachers in your high schools are proud of you, and your grammar schools are proud of you. And you should be

[01:30] extremely proud of yourselves. But as was said so many times today, I want to take a step back for a moment and appreciate what it really took for you, the graduates, to get here today. In the spring of 2020, most of you probably felt new on campus. You had one semester under your belt. You were figuring out what the course requirements were, maybe thinking about, Do you even stay in school? What do you do? Do you go to a different school? Was this the right school? You worried about picking

[02:00] a major. You worried about meeting friends. Unless you grew up in the city, you were still trying to figure out what Boston was and how to get around Boston. And trust me, I was mayor for seven years, and I'm still trying to figure out how to get around Boston. [LAUGHTER] In many ways, you were doing what generations of college students before you had done. But then, not long before spring break, your world—and the world, literally—would come to a crashing halt. Your education got turned upside down. We, everyone in the world, we were

[02:30] struck by the worst global pandemic in 100 years. Before you knew it, most of you were back at home logging into classes from the bedroom you grew up in, from your parents' kitchen, or from your back yard, or wherever you could find a good connection. You didn't let that stop you. Even when you forgot for a minute on Zoom to hit the mute button, and you might have been singing a Taylor Swift song terribly. But you kept going.

[03:00] Then, as President Kelly mentioned, you had to navigate around the rules of isolation, quarantine, and testing. And in some part, I want to apologize to you, because we changed the rules a lot, and people were mad at us along the way. But you did it. You wore masks in class and practiced social distancing. And it took time to adjust, when you think about it. It seems like it was so long ago, but it was really yesterday. But you did it. And you worked with your professors and your IT staff,

[03:30] and they made it work, and it wasn't easy work, because we had no idea what the next step was, or what the next move was. This has been a very difficult four years to be a college student. It's hard to stay focused. It was hard to make friends. It's hard to imagine what your future is going to be. Some of you lost loved ones or had loved ones get sick very, or you got sick yourself. Some of you had mental health struggles, either brought on or made worse by the pandemic.

[04:00] I've been there. And many others have been as well. But my friends, whatever you faced, and despite all the challenges, you kept going. You persevered. And you were here today on this beautiful Sunday in May, on Boston's waterfront, with your family and friends. Your degree soon to be in hand, and the next chapter of your life's about to begin. [APPLAUSE]

[04:30] But I want you to understand this. The message that I'm going to give you today is about you. Give yourself credit. You earned this degree in ways no one has ever done in the history of our nation. And you did it. [APPLAUSE] And no one can ever take that away from you. [APPLAUSE]

[5:00] There's a book that I admire, written by a group of people in recovery from addiction. It says, the feelings of having shared a common peril is powerful cement which binds us. You have lived through a common peril. This experience will bind you with each other and others that you will never, ever meet for the rest of your lives. And it's a bond that you can build on. So cherish these shared moments

[05:30] and that bond. Stay in touch with each other and build compassionate, connected communities wherever you go across this country or across this world. You always have dreams of what you want to achieve and how you want to live your life. At some point you've had those dreams. But to follow our dreams, we need to be able to imagine what the future brings. And it's harder to imagine the future right now than it has been in some time. But I'm here to tell you,

[06:00] keep faith in yourself. Don't let uncertainty, the uncertainty of this moment limit you. Don't lower expectations. Whatever you do, don't shrink your dreams. In fact, dream even

bigger dreams. The future is now, it is yours to create, and we are depending on you. I know it's easy to say that and stand up here, and you see people, other people say that. But

[06:30] deep down inside, I know that those feelings you have are there. And we want you to pull those out as you move forward. I want to tell you a little bit about my journey. You heard Bob tell some of my journey. When I was the age of most of you right now, I was working construction in Boston. In cold early mornings, in the heat of the mid-afternoon, I did try college. I went to Quincy Junior College for a semester, for a year, because when I was in high school, my grades were horrible.

[07:00] And I went there because I didn't get into a four-year college. And I went there for one year, and I did pretty well. I realized, I can do this. And then I transferred into Suffolk University, and I was pretty excited, because nobody took me in when I applied. I was there for a semester. I felt at the time I wanted to make money. The reality was, I wasn't ready. I wasn't focused. And I dropped out of school. I became a union construction worker like my father. It was

[07:30] hard work. It was meaningful work. And it paid well. But deep down inside of me, I wasn't happy, because it wasn't what I wanted to do. I also didn't have much direction. I was having fun, or what I thought was fun, and my fun turned out to be not so much fun. This pit inside of me told me something was wrong. And I ended up checking myself into detox for alcoholism. In my first night in detox, I thought my life was over, because I had friends. I was outgoing. I was doing stuff. I was involved in my community.

[8:00] I was coaching Little League. I was doing all the things on the outside, but inside of me, I was broken. And I didn't tell a soul that I was broken inside. Because I didn't want to tell people that. And I didn't realize it at the time, but I came to find out my life was just beginning. People in recovery helped me learn how to live a life one day at a time. I got back involved in my community. I got back into coaching. And I began to realize that the dreams I had as a younger person

[08:30] would only become reality if I pursued them. Eighteen months later, I was on the ballot running for state representative in Dorchester. I was fortunate enough to win that election. I had the opportunity to serve my community and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for 16 years as a state rep. But I still had more dreams. I had more fire, more that I wanted to accomplish. So I enrolled back in college, because I was the first of my family, and my parents were immigrants from Ireland.

[09:00] And I realized that I'd be the first of my family to graduate college, and I had to do that, because I had quit school and I didn't want to be seen as a quitter. So I went to Boston College at night. I worked in the day. I went to school at night. It was hard. And there's older students graduating here today, and I want to say how much I respect you on the challenge that you overcame to get to this day today. [APPLAUSE]

[09:30] I graduated at the age of 42 into new ways of thinking about the world around me. And I've never, ever said this publicly, but I think I had new ways of thinking because I was in school

with undergraduates that were 18 and 19 years old. I was learning from you, watching you, hearing you, hearing you talk about the world and what the world should be, and I learned from you. In 2013, I had the chance to follow another dream.

[10:00] The mayor of Boston, Tom Menino, who got an honorary doctorate here at this school, after 20 years of being mayor, he announced he wasn't going to run for reelection. I knew in my heart right away that I was going to run for mayor of Boston. I campaigned seven days a week, 18 hours a day. And on November 6, 2013, I was elected the 54th mayor of the City of Boston. [APPLAUSE] I held my inauguration at Boston College,

[10:30] where I got my degree. And I was sitting on a stage like this, and I was looking out at the crowd, and I was thinking about the path to me becoming mayor of Boston wasn't a straight path. It wasn't a straight line. It was a crooked line. It was a line of ups and down, highs and lows, challenges, obstacles, everything you can imagine. As mayor, I had the chance to work with incredible people across this city, residents of every race and religion,

[11:00] immigrants from every part of the world, small businesses, big businesses, nonprofits. We worked collectively to create jobs, make our neighborhoods safer, building new homes, schools, libraries. We built dreams together. And there were tough days as well. February 2020, things got really tough. We were one of the first cities in America that got hit by COVID-19. And we had to do something that I never, ever imagined I would have to do. I had to shut down the city that I love. We had to

[11:30] reorganize city government around supporting our most vulnerable residents. We were able to draw on the relationships that we built. We set up a field hospital up the street at the Convention Center that served over 700 patients, many of them homeless. We got Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots to thousands of students in their home because they didn't have adequate Wi-Fi in their home, or they didn't have technology to be able to keep learning. We set up food pantries and delivery service in every community, because the kids that went to our school, 87% of them were on free and reduced lunch, and they

[12:00] would not have had that meal if we didn't set those places up. We set up testing sites and vaccine clinics all across the neighborhoods. And Suffolk University played an integral role, by turning one of their dorms over to the City of Boston to allow us to house homeless people, who had no one to take care of them, so they could have social distancing and be safe and not die on the streets of Boston. [APPLAUSE]

[12:30] And despite tremendous loss, we survived as a city. Then in January of 2021, after seven years as mayor, I got a call that I never thought I would. Actually I missed a call. [LAUGHTER] I got a phone call from a 202 number. And I didn't answer it. And I got a text from a friend of mine, and she said, when you see that number, answer the phone, it's the president of the United States of America. [LAUGHTER] So the phone rang.

[13:00] And I answered the phone. It was President Biden. And he asked me if I would serve as his labor secretary. And it was an honor. But leaving my job as mayor and all the work that we've done with people, and all the folks that I work with every single day, it was one of the

toughest things I have ever done in my life. Because I love the people I work with every day, and I love representing the City of Boston and the people that live in the city. [APPLAUSE]

[13:30] But it was an opportunity and obligation for me to serve my country and help people in new ways. As labor secretary, we work together to put working people at the center of our economy, our recovery, and rebuild our country from the pandemic, create better opportunities for women, workers of color, our veterans, people with disabilities, people who need second chances in life, and people who live in rural America.

[14:00] And to protect our most vulnerable workers from abuse and exploitation. We made historic progress in the Biden/Harris Administration. That progress continues. But earlier this year, my journey took another turn. I got the opportunity to return back to my roots as a union leader. I got to do it in a way that I thought would never have been possible when I was a young kid growing up in Boston supporting the Bruins. As executive director of the National Hockey League Players' Association I advocate for professional athletes in the sport that I love.

[14:30] I champion workers' rights in a unique, international industry, and I get to showcase the benefits of workers having a voice for people to see all over the world. So I stand before you as somebody who's been on an incredible journey through his life. And I stand here, and I think back of the path I took from my house on Taft Street in Dorchester, where I grew up with Irish immigrant parents and a brother. As I said to you, it wasn't a smooth path, and it wasn't a straight path.

[15:00] Life is still the obstacles. It took twists and turns, ups and downs. And many times, the future was uncertain and my dream seemed impossible to reach. Being diagnosed with cancer at a young age, dropping out of college, going to detox, thinking that I've wasted a lot of my life. Each time I came close to giving up on myself, somebody said something, somebody showed me a little bit of hope to move forward—and my dreams didn't disappear in the face of hard times,

[15:30] they only got bigger. Every one of you sitting in front of me, you have a dream. You might not know what it is, but there's something inside of you. There's no question. A piece of that is coming through today. But no matter how uncertain the world is right now, don't limit yourself in what comes next. Go for that next dream. Get ready to dream even bigger.

[16:00] As a Suffolk graduate, you have a special opportunity to make a difference in the world. Suffolk has prepared you for real change. And I know from personal experience. If somebody said to me when I should have been sitting where you are in 1991, I would not think that I'd be able to change the world. And you don't have to become a mayor. You don't have to become a secretary of labor. You don't have to become a hockey guy. You don't have to become anything.

[16:30] Anybody can change the world. When I was a state representative on Beacon Hill, I couldn't throw a stone—well, I wouldn't throw a stone—but every time I looked out the window, I saw a Suffolk graduate or Suffolk student. And because many of you are lawyers, I didn't throw the stone at you. [LAUGHTER] But in seriousness, I was talking to one of the deans last night, and I said, if you take the Suffolk graduates,

[17:00] and you put them against graduates from every other Boston school, including that one over in Boston/Cambridge, [LAUGHTER] the success of Suffolk graduates outnumbers, I think, every school in this region. [APPLAUSE] And I'm saying that from experience, because the students, the graduates of this university go on to do great things. There are leaders in this city right now

[17:30] and across America and around the world that are Suffolk grads. I worked with Suffolk grads. I hired Suffolk grads. Members of my family have gone to Suffolk and thrived. Whatever field they're in, they share an uncommon commitment to public good. They share an ability to work together to get things done and make real change. They share a bond. And in a few minutes, you're going to join their ranks. It's still an uncertain time to be leaving college. But it's also a time of incredible opportunity.

[18:00] There are battles to join and a future to build. Robert Kennedy said in 1966, like it or not, we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty. But they're also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind. Robert Kennedy's words are as true today as they were when he spoke them back then. We also live in interesting times. The world is changing rapidly. And you might not realize it today,

[18:30] but you are already creating history. This generation of college students, all across this country, have faced adversity. You rose to the occasion. You passed the test. You proved yourself strong. You earned a degree during a global pandemic. And there are more struggles to come. And life will have more to teach you. But don't ever be afraid to dream big dreams. Class of 2023, the future belongs to you. And I can't wait to see what you do with it.

[19:00] Thank you. God bless you. And congratulations once again. [APPLAUSE]