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Building Bridges

Thank you Dean Kayes for inviting me here today. I'm thrilled to be in Washington, D.C.—one of the most dynamic, historically significant cities in the country, if not, the world. And I'm honored to be speaking to the 2014 graduating class of George Washington University's School of Business.

I'll keep my remarks brief because I know, 10 years from now, if you remember anything about today, it'll be your sense of satisfaction at a job well done...that, and the fact your guest speaker was someone who ran some kind of large organization and resembled Dr. Phil.

I know this because I've been where you are now. I can remember well what it felt like to be at my own college graduation. There were a lot of emotions – excitement, pride, relief. What there wasn't, was a sense of confidence in the direction my life would take. Trust me when I tell you, I wasn't the guy most likely to end up running an organization like mine. No, I was the long shot, the dark horse.

I grew up in Brooklyn. My father was a postal worker, my mother was a bank clerk. My sister and I were the first in our family to go to college. My parents were supportive but not everyone thought I was college material. My high school guidance counselor told me not to bother applying

because I wouldn't be able to handle the work. Not exactly a ringing endorsement!

I applied anyway and was accepted to Brooklyn College. My family didn't have much money, so I lived at home and worked my way through school. Eventually, after some encouragement from my wife-to-be, I took a chance on law school and ultimately joined Deloitte's Tax practice in the U.S.

But, I can assure you, when I first arrived at Deloitte in my stiff new suit no one was looking at me as future CEO material, let alone global CEO.

So, how did I manage to beat the odds?

I think it was a combination of factors. Hard work, long hours, adaptability – they all served me well.

But, I believe what really got me to where I am today were bridges.

From my early upbringing to the present, it's been about the bridges that people have built for me—and the bridges that I've built WITH others and FOR others.

It's a concept that's probably more relevant today than it's ever been.

For decades, success was tied to climbing ladders, today it's all about building bridges.

Some of you may be familiar with best-selling author Seth Godin, or follow his blog. In his book, the *Icarus Deception*, Godin talks about the fact we're living in a "Connection economy - an economy that rewards value created by building relationships versus industrialism. Our greatest assets are no longer the "things" we produce, but the connections we make, the bridges we build.

With that in mind, today I'd like to share with you three lessons I've learned through the years about bridges.

LESSON #1: Always remember the bridge that brought you here.

If you think about it, families are human bridges built over time.

Take your parents for example. Many of you are following in their footsteps, but for others here today, your parents—like mine—didn't pursue higher education. Regardless of the path they took themselves, all parents instinctively encourage their kids to do their best. Now back when I was in school and my parents were on me about my grades – *Where's the A Barry? Why not an A?* – that encouragement sounded a whole lot like nagging.

But, now that I'm a parent myself, I realize my parents pushed because they believed in me and wanted me to succeed in ways

they hadn't. They didn't get to college themselves, but they built the bridge that got me there.

Over time, you'll realize WHO you become and WHAT you achieve will always trace back to that bridge of belief stretching from your parents to you and eventually from you to the families you build.

LESSON #2: Build bridges WITH others.

We're living in a very collaborative age—your generation is connecting at lightning speed through social bridges like LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

It's this new reality that inspired my current leadership platform, I call it *Connected Leadership*. Now more than ever, I realize no one can go it alone—whether building your career or building business.

The focus is no longer on those who come to the table with the slickest agenda and the sharpest elbows. I believe the most valuable leaders are those who can bring people together and make big things happen. It's an environment in which the spotlight shines on the "WE" versus the "ME."

And I'm not alone in my thinking! Your school's ever insightful namesake, George Washington, once said, "A hundred thousand men, coming one after another,

cannot move a ton weight; but the united strength of 50 would transport it with ease."

LESSON #3: Build bridges FOR others.

If you're sitting here today, you've had some good fortune in your life. So pass it on.

The good news is: your generation totally gets this—and is likely to be more socially active than any who came before you. May you never lose this passion and concern for others. More importantly, I hope you find a way to turn that passion into action.

I currently serve as Board Chairman for College Summit, a nonprofit based here in D.C. College Summit was created by a colleague of mine, J.B. Schramm. The idea came to him years ago when he realized many of the less fortunate teenagers he was working with would NOT be attending college. In most cases, these kids simply didn't have the support, encouragement or role models in their families to guide their academic pursuits.

So J.B. took his idea, along with his determination and business savvy, and founded an organization to bridge that gap. This year, College Summit will help thousands of kids not only get to college, but stay in school to complete their degrees.

So: Be a Bridge—especially in your community. The world needs real solutions, not just big ideas.

Don't get me wrong – I want you to go out there and dream big. Be open to everything the world has to offer and don't limit your aspirations.

But, be prepared to really drive those dreams, to roll up your sleeves and put in the hard work needed to make them a reality. Be confident, but don't expect what you haven't earned.

I've got a good story for you about that.

The other day one of our HR people told me about an interview he'd had with one of your classmates. We're talking about a really outstanding young leader—4.0 grade point average... cutting edge research ... two board memberships. And, speaks five languages.

"Oh," and by the way," said our interviewer finally, "What kind of salary are you looking for?"

The candidate never even blinked. "In the neighborhood of \$300,000 a year—depending on the benefits, of course."

Well, at this our interviewer perked up. "So what would you say to FIVE weeks' vacation, FOURTEEN paid holidays... FULL medical and dental... company matching retirement to 50 percent of your salary? PLUS, a new company leased car every two years—say, a BMW?"

"Wow!" said the candidate. "Are you kidding?"

And the interviewer replied, "Well, yeah, but you started it."

In all seriousness, I want you to make the most of this next chapter in your life.

It's an exciting time.

So go work hard, be smart, think big, but always, always remember the power of bridges in your life.

Good luck to each of you —have a great life—and thanks for listening.

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