



Health Equity: Our Future is Bright

Western University of Health Sciences Commencement Ceremony: The College of Allied Health Professions & the College of Podiatric Medicine

Wednesday, May 18, 2016

I am truly honored and humbled to offer today's keynote address but before proceeding any further, I must first offer my sincere appreciation and honor to the Western University of Health Sciences'...

- Board of Trustees
- Interim President and Provost - Dr. Gary M. Gugelchuk
- Dean of the College of Allied Health Professionals - Dr. Stephanie Bowlin
- Founding Dean of College of Podiatric Medicine – Dr. Lawrence Harkless

...other administration officials, faculty, staff, families, friends and an extra special recognition of those for whom we are assembled today to celebrate and acknowledge.....this august, dynamic, essential, esteemed, game-changing, historic and legendary graduating class of 2016.

For those of you today who are delighting in in the advent of technology via social media, today's hashtags are #WesternU2016 and #HealthEquityCA So, let's make Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter feel the trending presence of WesternU ... (#HealthEquityCA and #WesternU2016)

Now, let's begin. In 1971, American singer, songwriter, and musician Marvin Gaye recorded a powerful and prophetic song titled "Save the Children". This song passionately spoke directly to the conscience of the United States of America, and questioned our moral, social and political will to substantiate the love we profess for our children.

"I just want to ask a question

Who really cares?

To save a world in despair

There'll come a time, when the world won't be singin'

Flowers won't grow, bells won't be ringin'

Who really cares?

Who's willing to try to save a world

That's destined to die

When I look at the world it fills me with sorrow

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Little children today are really gonna suffer tomorrow

Oh what a shame, such a bad way to live

All who is to blame, we can't stop livin'

Live, live for life

But let live everybody

Live life for the children

Oh, for the children

You see, let's save the children

Let's save all the children

Save the babies, save the babies

If you wanna love, you got to save the babies

All of the children

But who really cares

Who's willing to try

Yes, to save a world

Yea, save our sweet world

Save a world that is destined to die"

Marvin Gaye produced this song about 45 years ago; however, his message remains as pertinent today as it did then...

Your education has prepared you for good jobs and great careers in health care, but that the true measure of your accomplishment will only come from your ability to make a real difference, not just for the patients that make it to your offices and clinics, but also for the ones you will never see. Our society is established based upon the idea that if we make good personal decisions, and have great medical care, our health is all but guaranteed. The truth of the matter is, no matter how great you are as practitioners, health doesn't happen in a medical office. Health happens where we live, work, play and pray.

The Portrait of California 2014-2015 Human Development Report states that an Asian-American baby born today in California is expected to outlive an African American baby born the same day by more than 11 years. That difference can be as much as 17 years depending on which county those babies are born in.

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Another report states that almost one in four children in California lives in poverty and doesn't have enough food to eat. Consequently, children growing up in poverty receive less and lower-quality education, earn less as adults, are more likely to receive public assistance, and have lower quality health and higher health costs over their lifetimes.

The food insecurity of California households with children ages 0 to 17 increased from 11.7 percent in 2000-2002 to 15.6 percent in 2010-2012. Food-insecure children have increased rates of developmental and mental health problems.

In short, we have very serious opportunities before us today and before you, the graduating class of 2016, can help position us for the elimination of health disparities and the creation of health equity for all. There is no better time than now for you to commit your careers and your lives to creating the kind of future we all want for our children and grandchildren.

California's diversity has been a source of great strength for the state's economy and cultural life, enriching California's schools, universities, communities, and industries with a kaleidoscope of skills and knowledge and with a determination to succeed. California is home to over 38M people, coming from more than 60 nations and speaking more than 100 languages are represented.

Despite these strengths, the great advantages of California's demographic diversity continue to be undermined by persistent, unjustifiable inequities in various social, economic, and environmental conditions that result in gaping disparities in the health of vulnerable populations, especially low-income families and neighborhoods; communities of color; the very young and the very old; and those who have experienced discriminatory practices based on gender, race/ethnicity, or sexual orientation. These disparities in health status are a matter of life and death, shown by differences in death rates and life expectancy among the state's major racial and ethnic groups. Although the state's death rates have been steadily declining for almost all racial and ethnic groups, major gaps persist for African Americans relative to Asians and other populations. Similarly, the state's average life expectancy of about 81 years masks a more than 11-year gap between Asian Americans, at 86 years, and African Americans, at 75 years.

Such disparities in health or mental health are more appropriately documented as inequities, as these are the factors that shape health, that are systemic and avoidable and, therefore, considered unjust or unfair. Health inequities not only cause premature death but also create economic burdens for the United States. Between 2003 and 2006, the Joint Center for Political & Economic studies reported the combined costs of health inequalities and premature death were an estimated \$1.24 trillion, and eliminating health disparities for minorities would have reduced direct medical care expenditures by \$229.4 billion during that same time period.

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“Health Equity” is defined as efforts to ensure that all people have full and equal access to opportunities that enable them to lead healthy lives, and achieving health equity is the greatest social justice issue of our time. The color of our skin, where we live, and how much money we make, don’t have to dictate how long we live.

As I look across today’s audience and when I travel across the state of California, I can’t help but be both fascinated and appreciative of our rich and very strong diversity. I meet women, men, people from an array of racial and ethnic groups, low-income individuals and families, individuals who are incarcerated and those who have been incarcerated, individuals with disabilities, individuals with mental health conditions, children, youth and young adults, seniors, immigrants and refugees, veterans, republicans, democrats, independents, individuals who are limited-English proficient, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning communities, or combinations of these populations. Most, if not all of us belong to at least one of the aforementioned groups, and why is this important you may wonder... This is important because at any given time, me, you, a friend, a family, a loved one, a grandparent, a partner, our child, a wife or a husband can be vulnerable, disadvantaged and subject to any one of the many health and mental inequities that the Office of Health Equity was created to address.

I am grateful to Governor Jerry Brown and the California State Senate for allowing me this honor to serve as the Deputy Director of the Office of Health Equity, leading the state’s upstream efforts reduce and ultimately eliminate health and mental health disparities. But I realize that neither I nor my staff can do this alone. WE need you! The future health of our state and our nation depends on dedicated health professionals like the graduating class of 2016, working with a singular focus to ensure that everyone has access to the resources that enable them to lead healthy lives.

When I look at you, the class of 2016, I see key change agents in advancing our state and our nation’s efforts to achieve health equity and from what I see, our future is bright. Those of you who are graduating from the doctoral programs for Physical Therapy or Podiatric Medicine, or those graduating from the Masters of Science programs in Health Professions Education or Physician Assistant Studies....Yes, all of you are shining and shining brightly, therefore I say achieving health equity in California is truly a reality but we must share a collective commitment. We must paint a promising portrait that not only looks good, but one that becomes a sustainable reality for the masses.

As I close, I quote the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama:

“We did not come to fear the future. We came here to shape it.”

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So, as you all celebrate this awesome accomplishment, and as you reflect over the very difficult times and challenges you've endured throughout the course of your matriculation here at Western University,.....I encourage you to not rest on your laurels nor be discouraged with the looming reality of college debt, but I implore you to see the challenges of health inequality as opportunities to shape the future, not fear it. There is no better time than now to exercise your courage, dedication, passion and zeal to eliminate health inequity and improve the health, mental health, and well-being of all.

I thank God for blessing me with many things but I particularly thank God for my parents, William & Yvonne Miller, who are here today and who will celebrate 47 years of marriage later this month. My unwavering optimism that our future can be bright was instilled in me by them. I recall a pivotal time in the third grade at Camellia Basic School, a wonderful public magnet school in Sacramento, California. While at Camellia, a teacher named Mr. Young referred to me as a "dumb fool". The hurt I felt was only temporary because the following day, my parents constructively intervened and needless to say, I had no other problems out of Mr. Young. The resilience from that experience is something that fuels me to this day, and to stand before you today...an Ivy League graduate, USC alum, a father of two beautiful daughters named Skye and Leah, and a gubernatorial appointee, I think I turned out okay.

So Western University Class of 2016, I applaud you and encourage you; particularly in those times of adversity and in response to pundits and naysayers who don't believe you will make a difference because I know you will.

Our future is bright because of you!

God bless you all and make this day and the rest of your days amazing!

Thank you!!!

