Virginia Tech Commencement Address
Governor Robert F. McDonnell
May 14, 2010
Blacksburg
“Four Simple Truths”

Thank you President Steger, Rector Lawson, members of the Board, parents, faculty and most importantly the graduating class of 2010!

It is my great honor to join all of you tonight at Lane Stadium.

As a former high school football player I have always dreamed about what it would be like to be cheered on a college football field…..and this is as close as I’ll ever get!

I know this speech is the last obstacle standing between you and your diplomas. Mercifully, a speech doesn’t have to be long. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address lasted just five minutes. This talk will take only a few minutes more!

I’ve had the opportunity to listen to a number of graduation speeches recently.

My youngest daughter Rachel graduated from James Madison last Saturday.

Sunday I joined the President for his commencement speech at Hampton University.

The graduates of Hampton will never forget who spoke at their commencement exercises.

I am realistic enough to know that may not be the case for you!

The presence of loved ones and the great sense of satisfaction at having completed a rewarding journey will likely stand out in far greater relief.
But tonight I hope to be able to offer a few brief simple truths for your consideration as you go into an increasingly complex world.

Here are four:

1) Life is precious and it passes by too quickly. Plan ahead, but live each day to the fullest

2) You should use your unique God-given talents to serve one another, as that is the true measure by which our lives will be judged. Follow the Golden Rule

3) This is a great state and nation, led by good people, who work together daily to get things done. Our future success depends on your future involvement.

4) If you work hard, be honest, dream big, and pursue opportunity you can truly achieve anything you want in the United States of America

#1: Life is precious

We all learn that first truth, without taking a class.

Everyday life can seem at times difficult and tedious. It is not. It is fleeting. It can be taken in the quickest of moments, and in ways that we will never be able to understand.

This community knows that all too well.

Eight chairs are empty today. In each of them would have sat a fellow graduate ready to embrace the challenges and opportunities of the world. Instead, their lives were cut tragically short on that chilly April day in 2007. That pain is still real.
The terrible events of that day are etched in your minds and hearts. I will never forget being here with you the next day, visiting students at the hospital with President Steger and talking to heartbroken families. After that day, we are all Hokies.

Another chair also sits empty. It would have been the seat reserved for Lisa Tabor. Lisa, who loved this school, and who loved learning even more, passed away a week ago today. But not before she earned her Ph.D, in a great testament to the triumph of the human spirit.

Lisa did great things with her precious time.

The same perseverance that Lisa embodied can be seen on this field. Not in the touchdowns of autumn, but in the four Hokies who were injured on April 16th, 2007 and who graduate today.

Hilary Strollo and Heidi Miller

Justin Klein and Kevin Stern

You have done great things with your precious time. You inspire us.

#2: Serve one another

A few weeks ago I welcomed a brave young man to the Governor’s Mansion in Richmond.

His name was Heath Calhoun.

Heath graduated from Grundy High School, not too far from here.

He followed in his family’s tradition and joined the Army, eventually shipping off with the 101st Airborne to serve in Iraq. While on patrol Heath’s Humvee was hit by a rocket propelled grenade. He lost both his legs below the knee.
What followed for Heath were months of rehabilitation and recovery, and the prospect of a lifetime in a wheelchair.

But Heath chose a different path. He taught himself how to mono-ski, became a spokesman for wounded veterans, and through sheer will he got out of the wheelchair to compete in multiple sports using prosthetic legs, winning silver medals in two recent track events.

This year marked the first time a NASCAR race has been named after an individual. The “Heath Calhoun 400” ran in Richmond the first weekend in May in recognition of Heath’s tenacity, perseverance and example.

Two days before the race, Heath told me, “I was proud to go to Iraq and I gave my best for my country. That is what is expected of Americans.”

Right now, all across Virginia, people are giving their best for their fellow man.

They are using their precious time to do great things for others.

Every day, hundreds of people go to their local Food Bank to volunteer

Thousands of police officers patrol neighborhoods, protecting others

Many work in jails, others get involved in their church or synagogue or mosque, a good number join the military, some teach.

Serving others is the highest calling we have in this society. The Scriptures say that the greatest among you is the servant of all. Be great. Serve others.

It is those countless acts of sacrifice and service that are the hallmarks of American greatness.
#3: This is a Great Nation- Get Involved

There is an old adage that reads: “America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.”

You graduate today into the freest, most prosperous, most just and vibrant nation in the world.

We should celebrate that fact more.

Yesterday we commemorated the 403rd Anniversary of the founding of this country at Jamestown…..the James River couldn’t get them all the way to Blacksburg!

For these last four centuries, especially the past 234 years since Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, we have only been as strong as the measure by which the people have been involved in and cared about their government and its policies.

Edmund Burke said, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

Democracy is not a spectator sport!

When my daughter was serving in Iraq in 2005 nearly 70% of that nation’s citizens went out to vote in their first free elections while facing snipers and IED’s

That same year I was elected Attorney General of Virginia. Only 45% of registered voters went to the polls.

That is unacceptable.

Get involved. Care about your government. Voice your concerns civilly but effectively. Vote, and make a difference in your community.
Virginia and America depend upon you and your fellow graduates. They depend upon you deciding that character, integrity, service to others and involvement in the life of our nation will be the guideposts to your future, ensuring your greatest chance for success.

#4 Work Hard, Dream Big

America is a land of opportunities, not guarantees. This is what freedom is all about.

Many of you have selected your next opportunities already, many are still searching.

All of you will have more opportunities in this life than you can imagine. As Francis Bacon noted, “A wise man will make more opportunities than he finds.”

But that must start today with big dreams and a personal commitment to excellence and strong values.

No matter whether your first job is as the receptionist or the President of the company, work hard every day to the best of your ability. People will notice and new opportunities will come.

And so many of your opportunities will come because of your character and your ability to get things done.

To put it simply, character counts, results matter.

I know it is dangerous to quote Thomas Jefferson at a Virginia Tech commencement since he did found that “other” University, but the second Governor of Virginia and third President of the United States provided guidance about character when he noted,
“God has formed us moral agents that we may promote the happiness of those with whom He has placed us in society, by acting honestly towards all, benevolently to those who fall within our way, respecting sacredly their rights, bodily and mental, and cherishing especially their freedom of conscience, as we value our own.”

The world is hungry, and desperate, for leaders with character and a heart for service to others.

As you walk away from Lane Stadium tonight you will step out into a complex and diverse world of unbridled opportunity.

I am confident that, even in a tough economy, you will find great opportunities in New York, Beijing, London, Los Angeles and, more importantly, in Richmond, Roanoke, Reston and Radford.

And let me just make crystal clear, if you get offered jobs in Raleigh and Richmond- choose Richmond! And pick Norfolk over New York!

So today, before you accept your diploma, I put these simple truths in front of you.

Think about them from time to time as you encounter the peaks and valleys of life.

Parents and families I salute you for your love and support of your children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews that graduate tonight.

And, specifically for the parents here tonight, congratulations on the pay raise you are getting after today!
2010 graduates of Virginia Tech, leaders of the Hokie Nation, congratulations. I commend you on what you have accomplished. With hard work and divine providence, you will succeed in making your mark in this world, and Virginia and America will be better places because of you.

God Bless you, and Go Hokies!

Thank you