

Fairfield University Graduate Commencement Address
Delivered by Suzanne and Bob Wright, co-founders of Autism Speaks
Sunday, May 20, 2012

Suzanne Wright:

Good afternoon. Father President, Members of the Board of Trustees, Honored Guests, Members of the Faculty and Administration, Family, Friends and Members of the Fairfield University Class of 2012.... It is a great pleasure and privilege to be here to celebrate this wonderful occasion with you! Thank you for this special honor!

I'd like to extend congratulations to all those who received honorary degrees today - Joseph Russoniello, Jane E. Ferreira, Father Clifford, Dr. Timpone and Sister Clare Fitzgerald – thank you for being the terrific leaders that you all are.

While today may signify the end of a particular chapter in your life- the culmination of years of learning and hard work – it's also a day for beginnings. A commencement, after all, means to begin. Your time at Fairfield was simply the first of many stepping stones on what I hope will be a long and prosperous path in each of your chosen careers. Today, we celebrate you.

My husband Bob and I have had the good fortune to live just down the road a few miles from this beautiful campus for over 30 years. We watched our son Chris flourish here during his days at Fairfield Prep and grow into the wonderful man he is today. We feel blessed to call this fine institution of higher learning a part of our family.

As a person who decided to embark on my college education later in life, the impact of this day is not lost on me. Graduation was a milestone in my life as I know this day is for each of you. As a fellow adult learner, I am very familiar with the challenges of getting the most out of your education while managing home and professional obligations. And I know it's not easy.

But I would like to think that an education is just as important as leading a successful career and responding to the needs of one's family. Each of you made sacrifices in order to accomplish your goals – and I applaud you for getting it done.

Fairfield is a unique university because of what it produces– Students like you. Each of you is anchored by a core set of values – which will prepare you for the rest of your lives. And let me be the first to tell you that you can find your life's purpose at any age.

I found mine only eight years ago, when my grandson Christian was diagnosed with autism. At the time of Christian's diagnosis- 1 in 166 American children were reported to have autism. These numbers were readily available from the Centers for Disease Control – however, the American public was completely in the dark about how common autism really was.

To put this in perspective, at the time of Christian's diagnosis my husband was the Chairman and CEO of NBC Universal – a position he held for over 20 years – and even within his place in the American media – he had never heard of this disorder. We had no idea what regressive autism was. And we just couldn't believe that no one was talking about it.

At the time however, we thought, now that we have a diagnosis and now that we can put a name to what was happening with our grandson, he'll soon be on the road to recovery. Our optimism, as you can imagine, was short lived.

In that first year after Christian's diagnosis we learned a lot. We discovered that without early intervention, children like Christian, had less than favorable chances of one day leading independent lives.

We learned that families everywhere were fighting every day to have their voices heard – but hardly anyone was listening. We found out that these families were literally going broke paying for out of pocket expenses for autism therapies and were facing bankruptcy as a result.

Bob and I made the decision to do something about the many, many injustices our families with autism faced – and so a year after Christian's diagnosis, we created Autism Speaks.

Now - just seven years later and through the incredible support of our friends, corporations, and grass roots volunteers – we have become the largest autism science and advocacy organization in the world. We have fought for autism insurance reform, and as of today, 31 states now, including Connecticut, have laws preventing private insurance discrimination against individuals with autism.

In 2007, the United Nations responded to our global call for support by granting the autism community our own World Autism Awareness Day on April 2nd. In the history of the U.N. only four world health days have been passed- Diabetes, AIDS, Downs Syndrome, and now Autism.

This year, in recognition of this historic day, over 3,000 iconic landmarks and buildings in more than 600 cities and 50 countries on 6 continents signed on for our annual Light It Up Blue campaign!

From the Egyptian Pyramids, to Christ the Redeemer Statue in Brazil, to the Sydney Opera House to the Empire State Building – autism awareness was felt far and wide this past April 2nd. It was also felt 240 miles above Earth when the International Space Station signed on for our initiative.

You may have even noticed that right here on Fairfield’s campus - The Barone Campus Center - also joined our global campaign by going blue on April 2. And- Fairfield’s Men’s Lacrosse and Women’s Softball Teams wore the Autism Speaks U logo on their uniforms. We’re so thankful for Fairfield’s participation.

Many of you may wonder why we need to engage the entire world in our efforts. The reason is simple – autism knows no geographic, racial, or economic boundaries. And unfortunately, autism is getting closer and closer to home.

A little less than two months ago Dr. Thomas Frieden, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, released updated prevalence numbers – and these new statistics may shock you – as of today, 1 in 88 children – 1 in 54 boys have autism. This rise in prevalence is only partly due to better and broader diagnosis – it accounts for 50% of the increase. The other 50% is a glaring question mark. We really don’t know what’s causing this autism tsunami – but we’re doing everything we can to solve the puzzle surrounding it – and fast.

Some of you here this afternoon are already parents or are the next generation of parents. I can't tell you how important it is to know the warning signs of autism. As present and future parents I hope you will help us in our fight against this heartbreaking, developmental disorder.

In sharing this story of our continuing battle against autism I hope that you take from it just how much creating social action and advocating for the public good are important legacies of a Fairfield education - perhaps its most significant ones.

While my grandson's diagnosis was a devastating blow for our family, I can also see that it was a silent call to act. Every day we work to bring real life changes to millions of families.

My passion and dedication started with a little boy named Christian. I hope each of you finds your own mission... and remember- it's never too late to discover your life's work....

The Founder of the Jesuits, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, once said "Go forth and set the world on fire" – today, I hope the passions in your life, both personal and professional, are ignited. And - may you have the faith, the courage and the wisdom to be that special person, whose fire lights the way for others.

Thank you very much for inviting me to be part of this special day... many, many congratulations to you all... And now my husband Bob...

Bob Wright:

Good afternoon... It's a pleasure for me to be here today to receive this significant honor on this, the 62nd Commencement of Fairfield University. Father President , the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff - thank you.

First, let me say how proud I am of all of you. You have earned a great gift...The gift of a Fairfield education. It's an education that opened up your minds and your hearts ... it's an

education that – in the best spirit of a Catholic faith and Jesuit tradition showed you what it means to live the examined life ... and a life of service.

As you begin the next phase of your life, do not get discouraged if your long-term plans seem delayed or sidetracked. To use a baseball metaphor – life will throw you many curve balls - so you need to be ready. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked that “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

Some of you will begin your professional careers after leaving here, and others will hopefully advance within them. The one thing you can count on is that challenges are a part of life. But it's how you deal them that will determine your failure or success.

I've spent almost my whole working life as a businessperson. A lot of you will do the same.

My legal experience was in litigation, labor law, environmental law, corporate, real estate, arbitration, criminal defense, and divorce ... and that is a good background for the entertainment business!

When I was with NBC, I spent most of my time on people development - mentoring, hiring, firing, and setting and meeting operation targets and developing our business strategies. I also got to watch a lot of sitcoms!

I have covered a lot of ground, both figuratively and literally speaking. With General Electric, I traveled all over the world and met with world leaders and influencers. I loved what I did and was happy to have my family's support.

Suzanne and I have three fantastic children and six beautiful grandchildren. We have shared some of the happiest moments of our lives together....But as with any family there were times when things went wrong.

When you welcome your first grandchild into the world, the last thing you expect to learn is that you may never have a conversation with him.

What wasn't explained to me, however, is that autism is not an insular disorder. Autism's demands affect the entire family and the strain it causes can be debilitating.

In the months after Christian's diagnosis I reflected a lot on my Jesuit education, and the morals it instilled in me. Much like Fairfield - my college, Holy Cross, also taught me the importance of service.

It was an easy decision to create Autism Speaks, so that we could help our grandson – and the millions of children around the world like him. Solving the mysteries of this disorder has become one of the most important endeavors of my life.

Since we founded our organization in 2005, we have already delivered \$180 million to scientific research and to developing new resources for our families. We have 231 full-time employees working to raise awareness and funds through fundraisers, corporate incentives, and grassroots initiatives like our 95 Walks across North America.

Right now – whether you know it or not – you are connected to autism. It is a part of our community and we are linked to it through mentors, future employers, classmates, friends and family.

Approximately 11% of you are graduating from Fairfield’s School of Nursing. I can’t tell you how important your role is going to be in the future of this epidemic – but I know it will be a large one.

Compassion and willingness to think outside the box is what’s needed most these days from our medical community.

So many kids with autism have gastrointestinal issues, sleep disorders, seizure disorders – and many traditional treatment don’t work.

Get creative in your attempts to understand what these children are trying to relay to you – ask them to draw a picture of “what hurts” when they can’t speak. Your insights could help give a child his life back – what better reward could you ask for?

To the 37% of you graduating from the School of Education and Allied Professions – you will be at the forefront of this public health crisis.

To the school counselors, special education teachers and all-around educators graduating today – your diligence in and out of the classroom will lay the groundwork for these children’s lives. As more and more children with developmental disorders are identified early on and are mainstreamed –

you will be the next step in helping them to achieve their maximum potential. They will not succeed without you.

For those 13% graduating from the school of Arts and Sciences and the 12% from the School of Engineering – there exists great opportunities for your endeavors to cross paths.

Communication is the number one challenge children with autism spectrum disorders face. Right now many Apps can be found for iPad users who need help with communicating. It's great to see technology being utilized in this way, and the need for these kinds of applications is overwhelming. By working together who knows what kind of communication and engineering advancements can be made?

For our innovators this reminds of a story I read recently about an MIT instructor - Jose Gomez-Marquez – who has come up with a way to use toys, such as legos, to create inexpensive medical devices – such as Medical Education Design and Invention Kits - for developing countries.

This goes back to the out of box thinking I was speaking about earlier. The point is – see the possibilities and not the limitations in your work.

To the one quarter of you who are graduating from the Charles Dolan School of Business – I have no doubt in my mind that you have been thoroughly prepared for what lies ahead.

The Dolans are good friends of ours, and great supporters of Autism Speaks. I personally learned a great deal from Chuck Dolan over the last 30 years through our various business ventures with NBC and Cablevision – so it's fitting that a business school was named after him.

For those of you with MBA's and Finance Degrees – my advice to you is – make some money and go out and spend it in the right way.

Invest in the companies and causes that propel our society, not impede our progress. Your Jesuit education will help you discern between the two.

Let me just leave you with this final thought about ambition and success –

- You must have passion in everything you do.
- You must accept personal responsibility for your actions.
- And you must control your work product by following through on your ideas...

... I hope you keep this advice close to you as you navigate your professional life...

I am proud that the Class of 2012 is comprised of the next generation of thinkers, activists, technologists, entrepreneurs, and educators and of course, PARENTS. I wish you all the very best.

Throughout your lifetime you will celebrate many achievements, like this one today. But getting to that place of celebration may not always be easy. As you travel down this next path, keep in mind the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson – “Our greatest glory is NOT in never failing – but in rising up every time we fail.”

Good luck and congratulations to you all. Enjoy this day ... and may all your endeavors be a success! Thank you very much.