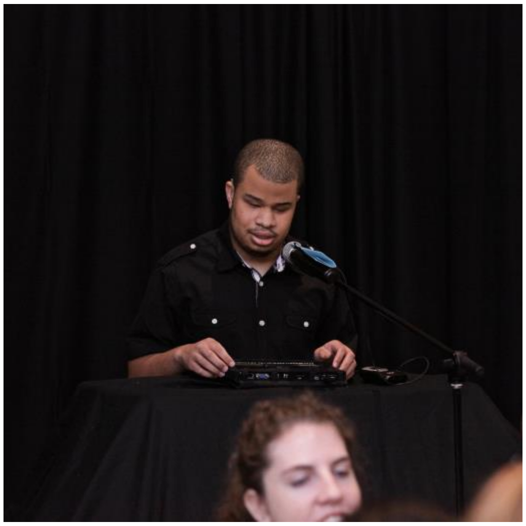
Capitalizing on Your Independence: Keynote Speech Delivered at the 2019 Southeast Transition Institute

Billy Pickens



This speech was delivered by Billy Pickens at the Southeast Transition Institute, an annual weekend event that helps young adults with deaf-blindness, aged 14 to 22, develop self-determination and leadership skills and make plans for important adult-life goals related to college, career, and independent living. Billy attended the institute as a participant several years ago and returned in 2019 as the keynote speaker. Billy is 22 years old. He is a college senior majoring in Communication – Mass Media, with a minor in journalism.

Throughout my life, I have always been amazed and mesmerized by outwardly confident people. I am not simply talking about people who are willing to climb the highest mountains or, more fittingly, deliver a speech in a room full of people. When I speak of outward confidence, I am referring to those who are bold in their demeanor, not afraid to express themselves freely and on the surface appear to have no insecurities. As someone who has dealt with anxiety and at times has felt none of these characteristics related to me, this appearance by some would make me question my own development as a confident and independent individual. How were they so confident and I was not? How did they learn to be independent so quickly and I was only in the beginning stages of reaching true independence? However, through these moments of confusion and lack of clarity, I believe I failed to realize the fact that everyone has a story. More specifically, everyone has a unique story and no person's journey is the same. In time, I came to realize that even the most confident people have had moments of weakness, uncertainty, and failure. I am no exception. As I have done multiple speaking engagements and spoken on numerous panels with a variety of crowds, I have been asked by many how I do it with such confidence. The same has been true as it pertains to my independence, as I have been asked by many how I travel to buildings at school independently or live in a dorm by myself. Honestly, there was a time that due to my own struggles with anxiety, insecurity, and self-doubt, I probably would not have agreed to stand up here today and share my story. However, I have found my voice with time and do not simply want to share my story to inspire you, but to encourage you to write your own, because in order to truly capitalize off of your independence, it is important to learn to stand firm in the belief that you can do just that. I hope that through the words I share with you today, I can empower you to be the strong and confident young adults that you all can be. However, I also want to illustrate the importance of knowing that it is okay to fail and to fall, but as I have experienced in my own journey of life, you can either choose to let your failures lead you to give up or as I did, you can use them as a tool to overcome.

I was born totally blind with a rare genetic condition known as Norrie Disease. This condition results from irregular cell formation and can affect a variety of bodily functions such as hearing, seeing, fine motor skills, and in more severe cases even mobility or digestion. I have experienced blindness, progressive hearing loss, and some difficulty with fine motor skills such as tying shoes. The retinas of my eyes and my inner ear cells were not properly constructed and being that the condition was genetic, I am not the only person in my family who has it. My mother, being a carrier of Norrie, received it from her father who was also totally blind with hearing loss and an inheritor of the condition. He and my grandmother also had two other daughters who in turn would have my two older cousins who both have Norrie.

Being that genetic makeup alone left me with a seventy-five percent chance of being born totally blind, my parents were well prepared even before my birth, especially my mom. As the daughter of two blind individuals, she knew what a person, even with a disability, is capable of. The last thing she was going to do was let her son be a statistic and not set an example. As for my dad, coming to terms with the fact that he would have a blind son may have been more difficult, especially because prior to marrying my mom, there were no blind people in his family. Throughout my childhood, he made it no secret to me that one of his greatest wishes was for me to one day see. We would attend a handful of conferences with doctors who would claim to have a cure, but who were always too early in the process of testing that cure to leave us with any solid answers. However, while the restoration of my sight would without question bring both my parents joy, it was clear from an early age that, this was neither possible nor necessary. I also believe that being people of faith, they were confident that with or without sight, God would have big plans for me.

For as long as I can remember, I was encouraged to explore and use the senses I did have to get a grip on my environment. From an early age, both my parents and my older sister were very accommodating in helping me identify the smells, sounds, tastes and textures of the world around me. Growing up in a three-story house surrounded by woods, there was always something interesting to investigate, especially in the backyard where I spent a great deal of my childhood. My dad, who built the house himself built a mini playground with two swing sets, a seesaw, trampoline and merry go round. This was my happy place and whenever I needed an escape, I would sometimes spend hours out there. These experiences also helped me develop the concept of observation as I would take in all I could from the nature around me and why I probably should be careful when near poison ivy.

My dad, a strong communicator himself, believed strongly in the ability of verbal and tactile explanation. For that reason, he would let me touch anything he could from plants to animals to car parts and literally anything I was interested in knowing more about. Being a construction worker, he would sometimes let me use his tools and help him with his projects. This may have made my mom's hair a bit grayer than it should have been at times, but these early experiences gave me a sense of tactile awareness and would more importantly be the root of some of my earliest feelings of confidence in myself.

Shortly after my birth, I began attending a daycare program at the Bank of America Childcare Center and I would experience a lot of concept development during these years. It was here that I had my first memorable moments of socialization with others as I made many friends and began learning how to better help my peers understand my disability. It was also here where I may have discovered my love for music as I would convince my mom to buy every CD the teacher would play at naptime. More importantly however, it was in daycare where I began learning how to use a cane, a little Braille and simply understand the impact adaptive technology would have on my life. My mom was adamant that for me to be successful and ahead of the curve, I would need to learn as much as I could sooner rather than later. She brought in several people from mobility instructors to occupational therapists to make sure I was ready the first day of kindergarten.

Childcare created some of my fondest and most memorable experiences from exploring nature with friends to efficiently taking my first steps with a cane with my mobility instructor at my side. However, I knew a new beginning was on the horizon.

Surprisingly, I don't remember much about my first day of kindergarten, but I do remember some of my experiences. Even though I had gotten an early start in learning Braille and adequate mobility skills, there was still a lot to be done. For that reason, for my first couple of years in elementary school, I spent most of the time in the classroom for the visually impaired or as it’s called the VI room to receive further training. The long-term goal was to slowly but eventually lead me into mainstream academics, but it was important to make sure I had a firm grip on the necessary tools to be successful in a mainstream classroom. However, because of my early start in learning and a support team of wonderful individuals, the process had a steady pace landing me in mainstream classrooms by the third grade.

Elementary school went by relatively smoothly. I made several friends in the VI room and in my mainstream classes, some of whom I still communicate with today. I also became more comfortable talking about my disability and comfortable with adapting to it in general. In addition to the support I was receiving from my instructors in school, my mom was instrumental in making sure I received the same degree of support at home. In second grade, we hired my first one-on-one habilitation worker, a trained individual who would come in to the home about twice a week to assist me in completing tasks such as homework, household chores, and activities in the community to help grow my independence and confidence. I became part of church groups, took piano lessons, went to various summer camps, and attended after-school programs, which helped me improve my social skills. I would also become vice president of the student council at my school in the fourth grade where I learned the importance of organization, collaboration, and my desire to live a selfless life.

While all the support I received in elementary school played a major role in preparing me for my future phases of transition, one regret of mine was not understanding the importance of knowing my needs and advocating for myself. In the beginning, there was always someone there to advocate on my behalf whether it was a VI teacher or my mom. Looking back, there were many times where I was merely along for the ride and getting adjusted to life as a deaf*blind* individual. As a kid, I failed to understand the importance of my voice and how at the end of the day, my and the voices of others like myself are what hold the true power to bring about change in society. However, my understanding of this concept would change drastically in both middle and high school.

I began my first year of middle school in a special education classroom, even though I had come from a mainstream classroom in elementary school and graduated with flying colors. I was not sure exactly why I was placed in this classroom, but I feel it may have had something to do with misguided perceptions and a lack of understanding as it pertains to my needs. While my VI teacher would have advocated for me to stay in a regular education classroom, she had since moved on to another school and had been replaced by a teacher that was new to the field of teaching and was unfamiliar with the fundamental role of a VI teacher. However, after less than a month in this class, there seemed to be an agreement across the board that I should be placed back in a mainstream classroom. While this was in a sense a win for me, there were glaring issues that began reaching the surface during this time. As I mentioned earlier, my VI teacher was inexperienced and struggling to find her role, especially in teaching three teens transitioning to middle school, all on different levels and in different places. I myself was still in the learning process of really figuring out my needs in the classroom and while my mainstream teachers wanted nothing more than to help, it was difficult to assist a student struggling to speak for himself. At home, my parents were doing what they could to help, but they could only go off of their own beliefs and opinions. This made for a year of miscommunication, clashing of ideas, and constant struggles in the classroom, prompting my mom to consider removing me from public school altogether. Despite this turmoil, I was strongly against leaving public school, my family, my friends and the life I knew at home. It would be this outward determination and an intervention by my math teacher who told my mom that by not allowing me to speak for myself, she was ultimately crippling me, which would not change the situation in any way whatsoever. He promised my mom that he would do everything in his power to help me get a better grade in math and he was a man of his word. All of my teachers, despite being unclear of my needs, did the best they could to get creative throughout the final leg of my sixth-grade year and help me further figure out what would work best for me. By the end of that year, I believe we were all exhausted but deep down, there was a heightened sense of hope that things would be on an upturn going forward.

Despite this belief, I knew that things would have to change. I would have to speak for myself more, be more aware of my needs, and be my own sole communicator. I also got a new VI teacher who unlike the last, was a bit more experienced and had a wealth of ideas on how to make the remainder of my middle school experience successful. During the early months of my seventh-grade year, she asked me if I knew what being an advocate meant? I honestly had never heard the word before so my original impression was that she was simply trying to introduce big words to herself sound smart or get my mind working after summer break. However, neither was the case. The word advocate would become more than just a word! It would become a characteristic of me, important then and important now. During our time together, my VI teacher and I began brainstorming ideas as to how I could best express my needs in the classroom. Since I was still working on my comfort level in verbally telling my teachers what I needed, I decided to write a letter outlining my needs, accommodations and most importantly who to talk to when they had questions. I explained that while my VI instructors and my family may have my best interests at heart, only I truly know what works best for me in the classroom. This was why stressing that talking to me first when issues arose was so important. It was as if a magic light switch had turned on and everything became clearer. Every single teacher I had, despite the letter being more than a page long, took the time to read it and not only expressed their gratitude for my direct communication with them but worked directly with me to make sure my experience in their classes were a success. It made me realize that most teachers genuinely want to help their students but may not know how unless they can have direct communication with the students. Instructors and parents can be of great help, but the voice teachers will trust the most is the voice of the student. Since then, I have been writing letters to all my teachers, now my professors.

My final years of middle school were some of my favorite proving that the fresh start transferring to a new school in seventh grade was effective. The school I transferred to also found me running into many old friends from elementary school, so that was a major plus. I was a Boy Scout in my mom's church, crowned a star student in my school, part of the National Honors Society, and a teacher's pet. However, my obstacles were far from removed.

If I was dealing with it before, I do not remember, but late in my eighth-grade year, I began struggling with heavy anxiety. At first, it would only happen occasionally on first dates, exam days, and other moments of intensity. Over time however, it became my random, smacking me in the body like a ton of bricks and sending irrational thoughts racing through my mind. I knew little about what anxiety was at the time or what I could do to stop it. I began finding myself pushing people away, becoming easily agitated, less motivated, and more insecure of myself. I even missed an entire week of school during my freshman year of high school because I felt too sick to go. I began feeling depressed and even though it never got as far as suicidal thoughts, I told my mom one day that I needed to leave the house to clear my head. None of us knew what was wrong until several doctor visits led me to a diagnosis and medication.

Having anxiety really shot down my confidence, my motivation to be independent, and even my security in making friends. For this reason, I kept to myself a lot during the first part of high school and focused on my studies. Despite this turmoil, however, it was during these times of isolation and separation from others that I began finding my passion for entertainment, specifically music and sports commentary. I would spend hours listening to outlets like TMZ and ESPN, so impressed with the way they discussed each topic in depth. I began listening to a lot of music, having conversations in my own head as if I was one of the commentators predicting the one-hit-wonders and the stars. I also began writing my own poetry, finding myself lost in the words of my truth. It was an escape from reality, a positive outlet where I could truly feel at peace even if it was for a short moment each day. I am sure it bored my mom to hear me rant about a bad call in a football game, a new Taylor Swift album, or a bad Kardashian business move, but deep down inside, I believe she was glad I had found something that truly made me happy. Over time, I began learning to combat my anxiety naturally through meditation, being more open about it with others, therapy, and most importantly for me, my faith in God. I still struggle with it at times, but I am happy to say that I have learned to live through it and most importantly rise above it.

I started high school in the Honors program due to my success with it in middle school. However, two Honors classes for any individual, with or without a disability, come with their costs and I learned that early on. While the staff in the VI room were for the most part on top of brailling my work, it seemed that as soon as they would Braille five assignments, five more would be assigned. It was exhausting to keep up with everything and I found myself falling behind. One of my teachers noticed I was struggling and agreed to let me drop her class while still receiving credit based on my performance in another class. This changed everything, as the work volume went down and academically, my freshman year went by relatively smoothly with me in standard classes.

However, there was something, my English teachers especially saw in me that did not align with standard achievement, my writing skills. I had been writing for fun since I was little, and it had become something I enjoyed but was also good at. One standard English teacher, during my sophomore year of high school especially started taking notice and encouraged me to return to an Honors Level class. However, I refused due to my past experiences and while he accepted that, he was not going to just let me get by with standard level work. Points were taken off for late work, missed commas, and simply bending any rule of professional writing. It got to the point where it was really affecting my grade and a meeting was called to figure out how to best resolve the issue. My teacher explained that his intention was not to fail me but to push me to do my best. He had made it clear that he stood by his claim that I was an Honors level writer and that he was going to treat me as such. I do not think I have ever worked harder for a passing grade in my entire life but in the end, it was well worth it. While at first, I was too heated to think straight, I learned a valuable lesson that year. Even through my English teacher's toughness, there was genuine support for my success and even more importantly that I was more than my disability. Some may feel that by being sorry for someone with a disability, you are being supportive. I would argue however that true support comes through treating them like anyone else and showing them that they are worth more than what the world expects of them. At the time, little did I realize my true gift of eloquently expressing myself on paper or even publicly speaking. In fact, it was after a successful debate class and a nationally top-ranking score on the writing portion of the ACT that I realized that I could truly take these passions seriously. For that reason, I eventually thanked my English teacher, even having him recognized at an awards ceremony for outstanding teachers following my graduation.

Despite my academic success in high school, I felt I was struggling socially as I briefly mentioned earlier. I was still coming to terms with anxiety and had stopped taking the medication prescribed to me in hope of going about matters in a more natural way. Even though I had several opportunities to be social and knew the popular kids in school well, opening up to them was difficult. I still had my circle of friends I had made in the VI room and a few other loose groups of friends, but I wanted something more. It especially did not help when during my senior year, my VI teacher at the time tried to put me and one of my best friends since elementary school who also happens to be blind against each other by saying that if he could pick up technology quickly, why could I not? Comparing someone who is already dealing with irrational thoughts about himself to another person is the last thing anyone needs when they are trying to feel socially accepted. However, with reassurance from that friend and a later apology from my VI teacher, I was able to put it behind me.

A group that did help uplift me socially again was the Savvy program, a four-week program hosted at Governor Moorhead each summer. There are three stages of this program: Youth in Transition where teens get a chance to better themselves in areas such as mobility and independent living, the World of Work or WOW as it is often referred to where teens get hands-on experience at a job site based on their career choice, if possible, and College Prep which includes teens taking a mock college course. I started attending the program during the summer of my first year of high school but left less than a week in due to my social anxiety. However, I was not going to fall without getting back up and decided to try again at the end of my sophomore year. I was glad I did and would go on to attend for two consecutive years. I not only learned much, from mobility skills in the community to budgeting, but I made many friends. Being that we were all either blind or low vision, we were able to relate to each other and gave each other a foundation of social support. Through the WOW program, I would also get my first hands-on experience at a radio station and become somewhat familiar with station conduct, technology, and lingo. In addition to our productive duties, we had the chance to take part in social events such as swimming, yoga, horseback riding, and even a trip to the beach. Due to the social support we gave each other during the short month we spent together, we agreed to continue our friendships after the camp ended. My girlfriend at the time and I came up with the idea of starting a daily conference call, in which we all gathered to discuss everything from our families' perception of our disability to our dreams for the future. The encouragement and acceptance I received from that group of people helped me become more comfortable with myself socially again and gave me the confidence to be open with others about my internal struggles. I still speak regularly with some of those people to this day.

It was also around this time that I first heard about the Helen Keller National Center in New York. My mother, after spending thirty years working for Bank of America, had landed a job she truly loves as a parent educator for students with disabilities, so she was very active in the disability community. She would tell me about the center during my first year of high school, emphasizing that there would likely be resources there that would help me live a fulfilling and independent life as a deaf*blind* individual. Being that I had plans of going to college and living on my own, this sounded exciting and worthwhile. I decided during my last year of high school to attend their summer youth session upon graduation to get an idea of what I would there. At first, I was a little nervous because even though I had been away from home before, this was my first time away for two consecutive weeks. This all changed when I met the staff who welcomed me with open arms. I was impressed by the amount of technology, experience, and knowledge held by everyone there. I was reminded constantly that my road to independence was my journey and that no independent person is independent overnight. During this program, I got a rough idea of my strengths, challenges, and things to focus on should I decide to go back, which I did just last summer. Due to school, I decided to start with a seven-week program even though many of the other students I met were there for even longer. During this most recent program, I focused a great deal of my time on independent living—learning to prepare meals; technology, such as learning how to properly use a variety of apps; mobility in the community; and, most fun in my opinion, job exploration. I had the opportunity to visit three radio stations and interview three very knowledgeable program directors about their experiences in the media line of work, asking them for advice on how I could be successful in the future. I also had the opportunity to write two pieces in the HKNC newsletter, one about my admiration for Ryan Seacrest being that he is one of my biggest influences, and another at the end of my seven-week stay documenting my experiences at the center. HKNC became a home away from home but even more importantly, the staff and the energy there gave me the motivation I needed to strive to be the best person I can be. I plan on possibly going back soon for more training in which I will learn how to live in an apartment independently.

Another way in which I prepared for college was through my transition plan. Prior to my graduation, a transition meeting was held with myself, a general education teacher, my VI teacher, vocational rehab counselor, and my mom to discuss ways in which we could prepare for the future. Being that I would no longer be covered under an IEP, mapping out my own accommodations would be key. I should mention that I had been attending my IEP meetings ever since the age of fourteen. This was not only worthwhile because I got to figure out what was being said about me behind closed doors, but because it gave me the opportunity to use my voice and truly advocate for myself. There were times when the staff and I disagreed about my needs but ultimately people listened before as I mentioned earlier. The voice of the student is extremely respected among staff. Being that Braille was one of my primary ways of communicating and completing assignments, its use was heavily emphasized at my transition meeting. However, what we did not realize is that times have changed and new technology has taken over. This would be part of the reason why my first year of college at UNC Charlotte started off rocky.

I had to learn early on that there is only so much any Disability Services office can do for you, especially when much of the staff is new as was the case in my situation. Some were not familiar with a deaf*blind* individual and being that it was difficult for them to braille everything, they tried to convince me to use audio materials to complete my assignments. For the sake of time, I would use them but due to my progressive hearing loss, it was difficult at times to both make sure I heard the material and properly processed it. It caused me to struggle on exams and the struggle in figuring out how to best assist me even led me to drop a couple of classes. However, as I have done in the past, I began communicating directly with my professors who were both understanding and flexible. Some would later say that communicating directly with them made it easier for them to work with me. I started receiving my assignments directly in a format accessible for Braille. Even though this would be resolved, I learned a valuable lesson. You should always be aware of the resources that are out there. Even if you are not the most technologically advanced person, technology, especially for those with disabilities, is becoming more useful and convenient. For this reason, I have taken steps to learn as much as I can and evolve technologically. I still use Braille quite a bit, but various apps and resources have allowed the lines to be blurred. This was not taught in school and it cost me greatly which is why I encourage everyone from teachers to families to be aware of what is out there, especially if a teen chooses to go into the competitive workforce. It is also important to advocate for accessibility if for some reason a software or website you must use is unavailable. This was the case for me, as the website that my professors would use to post assignments, make announcements, and make note of other important tasks had little accessibility for me. I had to get assistance from my sighted peers and work closely with my professors to make sure I was aware of the assignments. Even though I am about five months removed from graduation, I have begun making it known that the website needs more accessible features knowing that even though it may not benefit me in any way, it could pave the way for those coming behind me and create an easier college experience.

Beyond these struggles, going to college was one of the best decisions I have ever made. Going into college, I had this perception that it was all about academics and textbooks. However, it turned out to be more than that. As I started to regain a social life following my struggles with anxiety in high school, I met many people who helped shape my perspective of life. For the first time, I lived mostly on my own in a dorm and had a chance to truly find myself mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I was able to make mistakes and learn from them, figure out who my true friends were, and make connections with people who could play a key role in my success after graduation. In time, I went from being almost antisocial to seeking group interaction. Due to my constant advocacy for my needs from Disability Services, I became a member of their Advisory Board during my sophomore year. I would go out and speak to classes about my experiences as a person with a disability, inform campus executives on ways they could make the campus more accessible, and invite new members to the board. Just last year, I was voted in as the board's chairperson as well. In addition to my duties as a Student Advisory Board member, a few of my friends from the Board and I decided to start our own club in which those possibly uncomfortable interacting with people with disabilities in a classroom setting can have a social outlet to do so. We also used this opportunity to discuss further subjects such as advocacy, media representation and other taboo but important topics.

I also am part of a Christian organization on campus called M28. This organization was introduced to me by a friend who was part of my Communication studies learning community, a group where people with similar majors can build friendships and help each other throughout their studies. I had been going through a rough time socially and felt I was transitioning into a new phase of life. The group welcomed me with open arms, not seeing me as a deaf*blind* individual but simply as one of them. Of course, I have had many opportunities to educate them and make them aware of misconceptions which I have used wisely. Every week, we have Bible study and I attend their base church as well. However, we also do many other activities such as hiking, going to school sporting events, taking trips downtown, and even a yearly spring break trip to the beach in Florida. My friends in this group have encouraged me, uplifted me, and done everything in their power to assist me if needed.

It was also during my first year in college that I first attended the Southeast Transition Institute and made my first action plan. At the time however, I was tired, a freshman, and more concerned about hanging out with my friends back home than I was with any sort of action plan, which is never a good combination. For this reason, I halfheartedly worked my way through my first action plan, not really thinking much of it afterwards. However, as I got older and grew as a person, I realized the importance of not just having a vision but putting that vision into action. Action plans are not designed to overwhelm you or force you to do everything included right away. In fact, I would argue they are designed to do the total opposite in making sure that you achieve all you want to in a timely but reasonable manner. Earlier this summer, I had the opportunity to do my own person-centered planning with family members, friends, mentors, and others. It is essentially a meeting where we all get together and fill out a list of maps concerning my likes, dislikes, hopes, dreams, history, and other important qualities that make me who I am. Each person involved also fills out their own questionnaire about what they believe are my strengths, challenges, and their opinion on what career path they could see me following. Based on this information, we created an action plan for the next steps I should take after graduation.

On that note, I am sure you are wondering what I plan to do after graduation. My hope is to pursue a career in the entertainment industry as a music critic, media personality, voice actor, and other side projects. I know it will not be easy, but I have always approached every obstacle I have faced and as I hope you gather from this speech, I am up for the challenge. I have received a great deal of support and have the drive to get it done. If there is nothing else you learn from my words today, I hope you learn to not let your struggles, your disability or your mistakes define who you are or who you become. I know that in an age where social media makes it easy for us to compare ourselves to others, we lose authenticity of our own unique story and journey. Remember that it is not about how long it takes you to get where you want to go but simply about embracing the journey as it is and expressing gratitude when you do get there. You should also remember that there will always be people to help you along the way. Independence, while it should be a priority, does not mean doing every little thing for yourself. It means learning to do it yourself but not being afraid to be interdependent and use the resources provided to you. As Helen Keller once said, "alone, we can do so little but together we can do so much." Do not be afraid to fail for failure is a tool. You can either let it bring you down, or better yet, you can use your failures as teachable moments that will only strengthen you! I will leave you with one story I think about whenever I feel that things will never go my way.

A fun fact about me is that I have set foot in all fifty states. It was a quest my dad and I started when I was eleven after an overwhelming desire of mine to travel. For the sake of time, I will not get too deep into it, but I do want to share one of many stories that stuck out to me while on these trips, which took place over the course of four consecutive years. This was on our trip throughout the Southeast and we were eating dinner at a restaurant in Alabama. At this point, my dad and I were already mapping out our next trip that would take place next summer in which we would visit Yellowstone and other national parks. A man nearby overhears our conversation, walks up and places two hundred dollars on the table saying that he has been to these places and wanted my dad to use the money to take me there. We were shocked and not sure what to make of it, but we thanked him knowing that we would definitely have to do it now. We took the trip and wrote him a letter thanking him, loosely putting in to the letter that we were planning to finish our quest by visiting Alaska the next summer. A few months later, he responded with another check supporting our Alaska trip. I tell you this story not only because it is one of my favorite motivational stories to tell but because it is a story of unlikely perseverance. My dad and I were practically broke when we first decided to take these trips across the country, but it was our will, faith, and motivation that drove us to do it anyway. We neither knew this man or asked for his help, but the help of a stranger went a long way. Whether you believe in something higher than yourself or not, I believe all of you in this room are blessed with gifts, talents, and most importantly a purpose. One of my favorite things to tell people is to conquer your obstacles but don't let your obstacles conquer you. I encourage all of you to work hard, be positive, and strive to be the best that you can be. Let your light outshine darkness, let your love overpower hate.

Provide a heart to the heartless and make the world a better place.