

Jim McDermott
FDR Commencement Address
[As Delivered]
June 27, 2025

CONGRATULATIONS, Class of 2025! It's an incredible honor to be invited back here to speak to you. I received my FDR diploma 47 years ago. I wish I could say I was the valedictorian. [PAUSE] But I wasn't. I wish I could say I was a top student. [PAUSE] But I wasn't. In fact, back in 1978, all of the SUNY schools I applied to rejected me. [PAUSE] But I can say this—**who you will be**, and what success and happiness you will find, is not preordained by who you are now or what you did—or didn't do—in high school.

Tonight, I'm going to share some of what I've learned in the last half century, with the hope that these words might be of use to you. I know you all have shorter attention spans today. So this is 15 minutes of words.

My Journey

In high school, I didn't do much prowling around the library. I'm sure that's true for some of you as well. But I knew I didn't want to pump gas, or work on an assembly line forever. So, when I finally got into college, I changed my ways. I made a list of my life's goals. Consider making your own list. I realized I didn't like being told what to do. I wanted to be the *boss* of my life. And I liked *arguing* with people. So I thought, why not apply myself and try to be a lawyer? **Starting then**, I gave 100% of my efforts to academics. I studied very hard in college, and in law school. I worked very long hours as a young lawyer. I've learned that hard work matters. Work hard and it will pay dividends for you.

In the last half century, America has economically rewarded the highly educated. That remains true today. So, armed with a work ethic—and some **good luck and good people** who helped me—I was able to pretty much achieve my life’s goals. Today, the world you’re entering is far more complex. We now live in a very uncertain global economy. I fear it’s going to be a harder road for your generation. **But don’t let that inhibit you.** You’re going to do amazing things! Believe in yourself!

I’m here as living proof that you can call upon the power of your *imagination*. Your capacity to envision what you can’t see. But you know **in your heart** that you want. Many of my classmates worked hard and accomplished what they wanted, becoming doctors, dentists, scientists. One even became the school superintendent!

Your Journey

For your journey, in 2025, we know that you’re graduating from FDR High School at an *explosive* time in our country’s history. All kinds of explosions seem to be happening regularly. My hope for you is that you’ll have the courage to work hard to influence the path you want our country to take. The **echoes** of today’s explosions are going to live on for quite a while.

On your life’s journey, each of you is also going to have opportunities to get involved in charities and *causes* that give your life added meaning. Please take those opportunities. I’ve done death penalty defense work. I’ve represented, for free, many individuals facing hardships. People accused of crimes. People fired for having AIDS. People involved in child custody battles. I’m a much more fully-developed person because of these experiences. Helping others who are less fortunate is **always** worth it.

Now, politicians have defunded music and the arts since I was a student here. So I got involved in a non-profit called Teachrock, which aims to keep music and the arts in the DNA of America's school systems. The arts, which include novels like the one I wrote, are culturally important. They reveal our common humanity. Don't forget about the arts.

I really hope each of you can find one or more charities, or causes, that speak to you. Only you can know what brings you fulfillment. And it's okay to not know yet.

In today's ever-changing world, I also encourage you to take stock in where you are on different parts of your journey. A rewarding life needs continuous self-assessment. And continuous self-education. Update **your list** of your life's goals. And listen to your changing *inner* voices. The *inner* voices you hear now may change dramatically. Pay attention to them. Try to do what *you* want. Not what *others* want.

Cultivate your curiosity. Your *authentic* curiosity.

Our high school's namesake, Franklin D. Roosevelt, followed his inner voice, and he adapted it when necessary. His accomplishments are legendary. He gave workers the right to unionize, unemployment insurance, and Social Security. He successfully led America through World War II—all of this **from a wheelchair**. Eleanor Roosevelt, whose name is on our library, famously said: **"You must do the thing you think you cannot do."** Both Roosevelts are good role models to keep in mind.

As you depart FDR, always remember where you came from. This is a special place. Remember your roots. The Roosevelts frequently returned to Hyde Park. I hope you all do as well.

Honor those folks who gave you a helping hand along the way. That teacher. That administrator. That coach. That boss. That neighbor. Wherever you're going, you can't get there by yourself.

Friendship

Let me now say a few words about friendship. One of the most valuable things I got from FDR was my friends. Stay connected to **your** FDR friends. You will make new friends. But you will not make any new, *old friends*. Go to your reunions. Renew old friendships. You'll become better friends with your classmates.

Some of my closest friends **to this day** went to FDR. They played with me on the baseball field. I watched them play on this football field, which is much nicer now. We sat in the very same grandstands where your families and friends are now sitting. We've been friends for half a century.

I have a deep connection to them due to our shared childhoods. We see each other often. We don't just rely on social media. It is not a substitute for the emotional depth of in-person communications.

Ten of us from FDR spent several days together last month. We stayed up late. We told stories. We laughed. We drank. We hugged a lot. Some of us even used the "love" word. Which is a word we didn't use when we were teenage boys in the 1970s. The foundation of our friendships was built right here. We have a unique bond. Decades from now, I hope you and your FDR friends will also have a unique bond.

In addition to your friends, by all means, rely on your *family* for support. You'll soon be entering a **noisy** and seemingly **uncaring** world. Your family can help you navigate the

world. So ... love and honor your parents—and those who raised you. They all made sacrifices for you.

We're now at the final part of my address.

This is the stuff my wife wanted me *not* to say. She was not supposed to be here. But she surprised me this afternoon. [PAUSE] I'm going to say this anyway!

Based on what I've **experienced** and **seen**, there are five major life obstacles. I'm going to share them with you. You're going to chase your dreams. But if you can avoid these five obstacles, you will have an easier journey.

Obstacle #1. Early pregnancy. Becoming a parent has been the most **loving** and **rewarding adventure** of my life. My daughters came to hear what I have to say. And it's also been the most work. Don't rush into parenthood. I've seen too many young people who were emotionally and financially unprepared for parenthood. So practice sexual responsibility. Avoid becoming a parent too soon.

Obstacle #2. Drug Addiction. Walk the streets of any American city, including Poughkeepsie, and you can see many drug addicts who have had their dreams killed. Nobody expects to become an addict. And you won't, if you stay away from drugs.

Obstacle #3. Committing a crime. A criminal record will haunt you forever. Avoid the temptation to cut corners, or cheat, in anything you do. It's never worth it.

Obstacle #4. Marrying the wrong person. If you marry, choosing your partner is one of the most consequential life decisions you will ever make. Try really hard to get this decision right. I actually made this mistake the first time around. Be better than me. I got a second chance. Don't assume you will.

Obstacle #5. Getting in debt. Don't spend beyond your means. You do not need the next new thing. No new car loans! Buy a used car. Or take public transportation. Avoid credit card debt, which can be a real dream thwarter. Student loans are okay—you're investing in yourself. But control your finances!!

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So let's review: (1) listen to your inner voice, (2) pursue what excites you, (3) continually self-assess, (4) value your FDR friends and family, and (5) avoid the five major life obstacles. They are, once again: early pregnancy; drug addiction; committing a crime; a bad marriage; and credit card debt.

My Closing Request

Now, before I close, I do have one **favor** to ask of each of you. I came all the way from Oregon to be here. [Take out pamphlet and show audience.] This little pamphlet contains the Constitution of the United States, You can read it in less than one hour. I had it included in your cap and gown package. This summer, please read our Constitution. For our community. For our collective future.

This document is the **bedrock** of our country.

Our ancestors gave us this **precious** inheritance. This inheritance includes a legal system that resolves disputes—peacefully and civilly. It's a legal system of which I've been a proud member for 40 years. So reading our shared Constitution is your **last FDR assignment**. And it's an assignment given to you by somebody who's not even a teacher!

Finally, have some fun. Always do your work first. But when your work is finished, it's alright to have a good time! Like your principal says, ceremony before celebration.

But when this ceremony is over, go celebrate! You've earned it.

Thank you all for welcoming me into your special day.

FDR 2025 Graduation Ceremony Video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdEe_1NTBdI

Introduction by student president is at the one-hour, 17 minute, 45 second mark, followed by my commencement address.