

Ohio
Wesleyan
University

“A PRINCIPLED LIFE”

DELAWARE HAYES HIGH SCHOOL 2014 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Sunday, May 24, 2014

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**Rock Jones, President of Ohio Wesleyan University
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In the spring of 1903 the Ohio Wesleyan Methodists travelled to South Bend to play a baseball game against the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame. The Methodists were coached by a Wesleyan student named Branch Rickey. When the team arrived at its hotel in South Bend, one of the players, Charles “Tommy” Thomas, was told he could not stay in the hotel. Everyone knew why – Charles Thomas was black.

Charles Thomas was devastated, and Branch Rickey was outraged. Rickey stood nose to nose with the clerk at the hotel desk and insisted on a room for his black teammate. When the clerk resisted, Rickey threatened to return the team to Delaware without playing the game. Finally, the clerk agreed for Thomas to stay in Rickey’s room. Hundreds of times in the years that followed, Rickey told the story of his experience that day, of the pain on his teammate’s face, and of his own outrage. He recalled finding his teammate later that evening, sitting on the edge of the bed in their room, pulling on the back of his hand, saying, “If only it were not like this.”

That experience shaped Branch Rickey in the most profound of ways. As the team returned to the campus in Ohio the following day, Branch Rickey made a commitment that someday he would do something about this dark cloud of racial injustice in our society.

Branch Rickey was a man of conviction and courage who never forgot the commitments he made. In the spring of 1947, more than four decades after the event in South Bend, nearly a decade before the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, and nearly two decades before Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Branch Rickey opened the doors of major league baseball and invited the courageous Jackie Robinson to break the color barrier of America’s pastime. As the movie “42” reminded us with the famous portrayal of Rickey and Robinson alone together in the locker room following the well-documented incident of Robinson being spiked by an opposing player, Rickey often said it all started with that experience in the lobby of a hotel in South Bend in 1903—and a commitment he made as a student at Ohio Wesleyan.

Branch Rickey was a man of extraordinary accomplishment. While nothing compares to the historic step he took with Jackie Robinson, Branch Rickey was an innovator who had other enormous impacts on baseball. He developed the minor league farm system. He developed the batting cage and made widespread the use of batting helmets as protective devices. He built the first full-time spring training facility in Florida. He was largely responsible for major league expansion to the West Coast when he threatened to form a new league in the West.

One day near the end of his life, when Branch Rickey finished speaking to a gathering of United Methodists in northern Ohio, he offered to answer questions. The first question came from the heart of the packed auditorium. “Mr. Rickey, what is the greatest accomplishment of your life?” I am told that without batting an eye or pausing for even a split second, Branch Rickey said, “It has not happened yet.”

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Graduates, today you stand on the threshold of lives that you cannot fully imagine. You have completed the formal education that begins at home and continues through public school while you are living at home. In the coming year, many of you will go away to college. Others of you will enter the military. Others of you will seek work. You will do this in a world that is changing rapidly, with a future that is yet to unfold.

Consider how the world has changed in just your lifetime. You were two years old when Google was founded. You were eight years old when Facebook was founded. YouTube arrived when you were nine. Twitter was founded when you were 10. You were 11 when the iPhone was introduced. You were 12 when the Kindle made its appearance. Think about how these technological innovations define the way you interact with one another and with the larger society today. None of them existed when you were born. Now, just imagine the changes that will occur over the course of your lifetime. Your lives will be defined by knowledge not yet discovered and technologies not yet imagined. It will be an exciting, tumultuous, ground-breaking ride, and none of us knows precisely how things will look 25 or 30 years from now when you’re in the stands watching your sons and daughters receive their high school diplomas.

We live in an era of unprecedented change and extraordinary uncertainty. But as you graduate today, I want to call you back to the timeless virtue of a principled life. A principled life is one that is grounded in moral values and ethical commitments. It is a life that rests on a foundation of strength that provides ballast in threatening times, direction over the course of the long haul of life, and strength in the face of personal challenge.

Branch Rickey reflects the virtue of a principled life. There are three things in the story of Branch Rickey that I invite you to consider and to carry with you as you walk away from Hayes High School with diploma in hand and the future before you.

First, Branch Rickey’s life was defined by a commitment he made when he was only slightly older than you are today. It was a commitment that was born out of a deeply personal experience, when he watched someone being treated in the most inhumane of ways. He recognized human indignity, and he understood the stain of racial prejudice and a social system that treated a group of human beings as if they were not human. At the tender age of 20, Branch Rickey made a commitment that over the course of his life he would address this social cancer.

Second, Branch Rickey made the commitment without any idea of how or when he would fulfill the commitment. He knew right from wrong, and he knew he would spend his life looking for the opportunity to correct the wrong. Little did he know in 1903 that it would be four and a half decades before he could ultimately act. Nor did he know in 1903 that his life would unfold in a way that would allow him to fulfill his commitment on the national stage with an action that would reverberate around the world. Nor did he know that the scar of racial injustice would magnify through the years and that he would face opposition that would threaten his life. He made a commitment without any idea of how or when he would fulfill the commitment. And he never forgot the commitment.

Finally, long after he opened the doors of Major League Baseball to players of color, with his name already firmly etched in the nation’s history books, Branch Rickey did not consider his work complete. Past the age of 80, when asked to name the greatest accomplishment of his life, he simply answered, “it has not happened yet.”

Such is the nature of a principled life. It is a life born of the courage of conviction and the resolve of commitment. It is a life that can affect change. Occasionally that change shakes the foundation of an entire society. More often, it provides a model for principled living in the course of day-to-day life – a life shared with family, with people at work, and in a community in which you make your home.

Graduates, it is not too soon to contemplate the commitments that will define your life. You don’t have to know how or when those commitments will be fulfilled. That moment may sneak up on you and come when you don’t expect it. You have to be ready to make those courageous, principled acts any day and any time. So, as you prepare to move from the relative security of the high school years into a world filled with unknowns, what will define your life?

Your generation inherits challenges that are unprecedented. Your generation must confront the plagues of world hunger, climate change, sectarian violence, public health, and global poverty. These are enormous challenges that threaten the fabric of human society and the future of our planet.

What commitments will you make? What principles will define your life? And, six decades from now, when asked about the greatest accomplishment of your life, will you be willing to say, “it has not happened yet”?

Congratulations on this, your special day. You join an impressive group of individuals who claim the honor of graduating from Delaware Hayes High School and who have demonstrated in countless ways, large and small, the virtue of a principled life. Now you take your place among them.

I wish you the very best in all that is ahead, and I am honored to share this day with you. Congratulations!