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WIL HAYGOOD COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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Thank you, President Jones, for your mighty fine introduction. I'd like to thank Rock and First Lady Melissa Lollar Jones for the lovely dinner they hosted for me here last night. I'd also like to thank the Board of Trustees, faculty, and student leaders who invited me here to this wonderful university to be with you all today. I'd like to wish all the mothers a Happy Mother's Day. And also to thank all the military veterans, past and present, who are here who have served this wonderful country of ours.

I'm happy to be joined here today with my great friend, and one of your most distinguished alums, Denver Post Exec Editor Greg Moore. Also, happy that one of your cherished teachers, Dr. Michael Flamm, sits among us today.

Someone just the other day asked me about the movie, "The Butler," and the afterglow of it with all its cinematic success. I actually like to keep it real and remain humble about that pretty amazing experience. But I've gotten some unique phone calls.

Marsha, who I knew in grade school, tracked me down in Washington and apologized for swiping an Easter egg out of my basket when my back was turned in the third grade during our Easter egg hunt. I had to confess to her I had completely forgotten about that headline-making incident. Then she let me know she was single and inquired about my marital status. She also went ahead and told me she knew the gross receipts of the movie not only in the USA but overseas as well. In more ways than one, that was indeed a little too much information.

You all are about to be graduates of Ohio Wesleyan, and I salute you. If you are graduating summa cum laude, hats off to you. And, if you are graduating like I did, summa cum lucky, I offer you a tip of the hat as well! Your families and friends are very proud of you today.

To really appreciate what you have done, I'd like to look back a bit, to the year 1965 – 50 years ago. Our nation, at the time, was in turmoil. The streets were on fire.

Black Americans were fighting for equal rights and access to the ballot box. There was a great historic march in Selma, Alabama. It was shown on screen in that stunning movie last year. My grandfather, James Burke, was born in Selma. He found it nearly impossible to exercise his right to vote there because of the color of his skin. He had left school in the sixth grade. He was the son of a poor farmer. But he had to move to another state to ensure his right to vote wasn't trampled upon by people who did not want him to vote. In 1965 – 50 years ago – the historic 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed. But in the wake of its passage were left the dead and bloodied bodies of Medgar Evers and Jimmie Lee Jackson and Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman and James Chaney and Viola Liuzzo and James Reeb. They all died because they wanted black Americans to be able to vote. They weren't the only ones. There were many more.

That precious right to vote. It comes in other manifestations to. Not just at the ballot box.

When each of you left high school, you made your first major vote in life: You voted to extend your education. It wasn't remotely as difficult as acquiring the right to vote in the 1960s, but still, it was a vote. You put thought and action into it. It felt – at least the choice of school – like a monumental decision. It was a vote of the mind. It was a psychological victory that you gave yourself. Here is why a vote of the mind is so very important.

When I was in junior high, I was cut from the basketball team. Yes, I nearly cried. But I did something: I voted to walk through the door of the coach's office and ask him if I could have another chance. He gave me that chance. I ended up being on the team. In the 10th grade, I went out for the team and got cut again. Now you might be thinking this Haygood must have not been a very good ballplayer! I beg to differ. Anyway, like I did in junior high, in high school I voted to go ask the coach for another chance. I ended up making the team. I scored double figures in one game that year, too. Twelve glorious points.

To go from not making the team to 12 points is a lovely thing. To have the cheerleaders sing your name is beyond a lovely thing. You just know I was going to go out for the basketball team at Miami University. Dang if I didn't get cut off of that team, too. I wasn't about to leave my vote on the floor. I asked Coach Jerry Pierson for another chance. I ended up making the team.

What life throws at you after you leave here today – and there will be some unexpected pitches thrown your way – I want you to vote to believe. Fifty years ago those who didn't have the vote had to believe that they would someday get it.

I was in South Africa when the great leader Nelson Mandela was in prison. He had languished there for 27 years. I was a reporter covering his possible release from prison. He was a freedom fighter. He fought the laws of segregation in the borders of his own country. He was given the chance to leave prison after so many years if he would denounce his political party. He refused to.

Without the vote, he still voted. He voted to believe in himself.

On another assignment, in Somalia, where a war was going on, two kids came one evening to take me to a secret hiding place. They told me some village elders were hiding treasures that they wanted me to see. I rushed through the darkness, up dirt alleyways, and came to a little building with several rooms. The two elderly men inside took me to another secret location. And inside this secret location, they pulled a blanket from a huge stack of something in the corner. I walked closer. There was dust everywhere. The dust covered most of the books. Yes, that was the treasure that they wanted to show me. They pointed to it and said: "These are our beloved books. We must stop the rebels from burning them." They told me the first things rebels do when they invade a village is burn books. I am so in love with books you can imagine how much I marveled at their bravery. They were willing to put themselves in great danger by hiding those books.

There were no ballot boxes in the village. And yet they found a way to believe, they found a way to vote their courage!

You'll leave here and you'll be presented with all kinds of decisions and opportunities. And you'll vote on them. I want you to vote to believe. I want you to vote to help end poverty and hunger. I want you to vote to give our nation more accountable police departments. I want you to vote to heal religious and racial strife. I want you to vote to aid your neighbors in need, to help a friend who might be being picked on because of their sexual orientation.

On another story assignment I found myself sitting with Judy Shephard. She's the mother of Matthew Shephard. Matthew was, by all accounts, a wonderful young man. He was 21 years old, your age. He lived in Laramie, Wyoming. One night some bad people tied young Matthew up to a fence post, wrapped his hands around his back, and killed him. All because he was gay.

He had some friends, but maybe not enough of them in that rural landscape. Matthew had chosen, had voted, to live his life out in the open, and bless his heart for that.

For the past five years, I have been at work on a book about Thurgood Marshall, the nation's first African-American United States Supreme Court justice. He was nominated in 1967. He had been a great civil rights lawyer. He won a series of federal voting rights lawsuits, which laid the groundwork for the 1965 Voting Rights Act of 50 years ago. His nomination created a battle within the halls of the United States Senate. There were senators, especially from the South – where so many of those civil rights battles had taken place – who did not want Thurgood Marshall on the United States Supreme Court. Many, many people wrote letters to their senators, either opposing or supporting the nomination. Senator John McClellan of Arkansas did not want Thurgood Marshall on the Supreme Court.

There was a little old black lady who lived in Texarkana, Arkansas, right there on the border between Texas and Arkansas. Her name was Barbara Ross. When Barbara Ross realized that her senator, John McClellan, was not going to vote to confirm Marshall, she picked up her sword, which was her pencil, and she wrote him a letter.

I came across Mrs. Ross's handwritten letter in Austin, Texas, while researching my Thurgood Marshall book. In the opening of her letter, Mrs. Ross described herself as "a black woman, an American." "It has been made quite clear which side you are on," she wrote to this very powerful United States senator. "We all know why you and the other southern senators don't want Marshall to be on the Supreme Court and it is not because of the United States Constitution. You don't want him because he's black and that is the only reason. Chances are that the nomination will be turned down. Skin color doesn't make the person, Senator, character makes the man."

There was probably not a single bigshot politician in all of Arkansas who gave a two cents about this Mrs. Ross lady, some black lady in rural Arkansas. She concluded her brave and soulful 1967 letter with these words: "One of these days the President of the United States will be a black man."

Thurgood Marshall would eventually be confirmed for a seat on the United States Supreme Court. And as we know, of course, Mrs. Ross's prediction about a black president inside the White House – a president of all of America – came true 42 years later.

Barbara Ross believed. Medgar Evers believed. Jimmie Lee Jackson believed. When you leave here today graduates, believe in the power within you. Vote to believe you'll change the world you are now inheriting. Vote to believe in great love stories. Vote to believe in miracles happening in the White House.

And if you do that, you will raise up those who were taken from us far too early, all those beautiful wonderful souls who fought for freedom and justice 50 years ago so that you could experience a freer and more prosperous America as you sit here today.

I'm honored beyond words to have been asked to spend a little time with you.

To the graduates of Ohio Wesleyan University, God bless you and congratulations.