

Commencement Address at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology

“The Power of Discontent”

by Kenneth W. Mack

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It is an honor to be here. Thank you to Dr. Schiavelli and the members of the Board of Trustees for giving me the distinct privilege of coming back to my hometown for the second time in the span of two years to reflect on the past and future of Harrisburg and its great institutions, of which Harrisburg University is one of the newest but surely on its way to becoming one of the finest. It’s a pleasure to see such distinguished guests, among them City Council Members, and so many friends and family. It’s a pleasure to be speaking just a few blocks from the downtown branch of the Dauphin County library, where I began the journey of learning that brought me here today, just a mile or so from Downey Elementary School, where I began my formal education, just a few miles from Harrisburg High School, where I began to explore the wider world, and just a bit further from Central Dauphin East, which was my last stop before entering that wider world. It’s also a distinct honor to remember the Harrisburg School District teachers who inspired me the most on that journey, among them Yvonne Echols Hollins (now director of the Boys and Girls Club) – who will always be “Miss Echols to me” – John Friend (now of the Carlisle School district), Kermit Leitner (recently retired from the Susquehanna School District), and many many others. But

what gives me perhaps the most pleasure is seeing you, the graduates, for ultimately it is you who have brought me here today.

I met Mel Schiavelli a few years ago when he began trying to convince me that I had something to contribute to Harrisburg University, and it's taken me a while to figure out what I can do to be of help in this truly audacious undertaking. For I am not a university administrator, a business leader, or even – at least in my present incarnation – an engineer or scientist, and Harrisburg University already has many of these kinds of people who help it to do its important work. What I am is a 45-year-old lawyer, an American historian and a law professor of some note, with perhaps an interesting biography. When Mel asked me to give the commencement address, I instantly said “yes,” because I thought that something in my biography might be of interest, and perhaps of inspiration, you as you prepare to go out into the world.

I will start with the most important thing and tell you that I will be brief. For, if I am now old enough to be asked to do a commencement address, I'm also young enough to remember that what you all really want to do on an occasion like this is to get out and celebrate. So what I would like to do today is to tell you three things about myself that grow out of something that you may not know about me.

I stand here before you today as a person of some accomplishment because several times in my life, I seemed to have an entire world of possibility in front of me – as all of you do today – but found myself profoundly discontented. I'll tell you about three times that it happened, and then I'll let you go out and celebrate.

The first of these occurred when I was sitting just where you are today – 23 years ago – when I graduated from college. I went to a college called Drexel University, which started as an institution very much like this one. Drexel was founded in 1891 by a Philadelphia businessman named Anthony Drexel who had made a good deal of money and wanted to do something for education in his hometown. At that time, the Philadelphia area was home to a number of institutions of higher learning, and Mr. Drexel initially toyed with the idea of founding a college that looked like something like them. But that seemed to duplicate what already existed. Instead the institution that he decided to found was something altogether different. It was intended to be free, or as low cost as possible, with its scholarships and financing supplied by local business leaders. It was intended to educate urban youth who wouldn't quite fit in at a regular college. It was a market-driven institution. It tried to educate youths with “practical skills” -- those that were needed in the local job market. In fact, in Drexel's early years, it was hard to even get admitted to study, say mechanical engineering, unless the instructors were fairly certain that you had a job waiting for you when you got out. Sound familiar?

When I arrived at Drexel in 1982, it was a much bigger place than in 1891, but it pretty much had the same core values. In fact, the head of my department described it this way: we “ran a bare bones operation. . . . Keep tuition as low as possible . . . and that was the value proposition for the students. You're going to get a no nonsense education. You're going to get the co-op. [which is an extended internship] And when you're done, you're going to get a job.” Sound familiar? Those core values seemed exactly right for me, because ever since I was in Fifth Grade, I wanted to be an Engineer

– largely because of my father, who is here today, who worked in the post office but went to college when I was in grade school in order to become an engineer. I wanted to follow in his footsteps. So I came to Drexel, and I was fortunate enough to do well there, and when I was about to graduate, it seemed like a whole world of possibility was in front of me.

I had a job offer at Bell Laboratories, which had Nobel Prize winners on its staff and was the most prestigious place in the entire world for someone like me to work. I had a full scholarship to pursue a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering if I wanted to do that. Most importantly, back in Harrisburg, everyone I knew was proud of me. But I was profoundly discontented, and it took me a while to figure out why.

It turned out that Drexel was exactly the right place for me to be, because it taught me that I was in the wrong place. Drexel had a co-op program, which meant that before I graduated, I got a chance to work for a year-and-a-half as an Engineer, alongside Engineers who had been working in the field for decades. When I talked with my co-workers, or went out to get a beer with them after work, I saw my future in front of me. It was promising. It was the logical, and it seemed secure. But I wasn't passionate about it. I could envision myself being 30 years old, content, accomplished, and bored. So I decided to take a chance on law school.

Now, I didn't know much about law school, or really a great deal about being a lawyer. But I knew that it was something different from what I'd known before. It seemed exciting, and it seemed challenging. I was lucky enough to be admitted to Harvard Law School, so I went. It wasn't always a happy experience, and up had its ups

and downs, but it changed my life. I met a fellow law student named Barack Obama who became a good friend. I traveled to South Africa to participate in the anti-apartheid movement. I met a Nobel Peace Prize winner and I've had dinner with the President of the United States. But ultimately those things weren't that important. What was most important was that I was happy, and I was passionate about what I was doing in life.

So that's the first thing I wanted to tell you about how profound discontent has helped to shape my life.

The second episode that I'd like to relate to you is a little different. It will be a little shorter. This one involves family and community. It started about ten years ago, and it's still unfolding. At that time I was in graduate school. (The result of yet another career change, but that's another story) I lived in a small community in New Jersey, and I had many dear friends there. I was about a year away from completing my doctoral studies, and I was going to become a law professor when I was finished. I was living only about two hours' drive from Harrisburg and my family there, which was very important to me. I was in the middle of some exploratory talks with a very prestigious law school in New York that was interested in hiring me. I really loved where I was and was excited about where I was going. But at the same time I had a nagging feeling of discontent. That something was wrong. Again it took me a while to put my finger on it. It was that I was too comfortable. I had been living in the same community for about five years, and seemed to have just about everything that I needed. But, I had an offer to spend my last year of graduate school on a fellowship at Harvard, and I decided to take it just to see something different.

I know that to many people Harvard is a prestigious name, but there were many reasons for me not to go. I had already been there for law school, so I didn't believe that I needed the prestige of Harvard attached to my name. Even though I teach there now, at that time Harvard had a reputation for being an unfriendly place for students. Professors were busy and didn't have much time to spend with students, and people thought that it was a factory, churning out good lawyers but not doing much to make them happy in the process. It was also true that I had very few friends left in Massachusetts. I would have to rebuild my circle of friends from scratch. Finally, and this will be familiar to those of you who have been to Massachusetts – it is cold in the winter. In fact, the first year I was there it seemed as though there was snow and ice on the ground from December to April. Harvard seemed like a cold place, in many senses of the word. But I went anyway.

For the first seven months I was there, what I've told you turned out to be largely true. To say that I was unhappy in Massachusetts would be an understatement. So, when spring finally rolled around – and in Massachusetts that is usually about May 1st – I was preparing to go down to New York, to take the job that I had wanted for a long time, and to be a bit closer to my family. Then something happened that changed my life. I met, or perhaps I should say re-met for we had known each other for quite some time, the person whom I would marry a year later. At around the same time, Harvard offered me a job teaching there. I almost said “no” to Harvard – and not many people do – because I thought I would be more comfortable elsewhere. Initially I decided to turn the job down. But on one of those long drives back from Boston to Harrisburg I had an

epiphany. I decided that I would take a chance on the job, the community, and the person, that were right in front of me. Ten years later, I'm very happy that I did.

Harvard turned out to be a wonderful community. I'm sure that many of you are now hearing more about it since my former colleague has been nominated to the Supreme Court. Some of my closest friends are there. My wife and I put down roots in a local community that I had always thought that I would never like, and some of our closest friends are also there. Of course I now have two beautiful children who, along with my wife, are the center of my life.

That's the second episode that I wanted to relate to you today. It's about how a nagging sense of discontent ten years ago led me to make a series of decisions without which I cannot imagine being happy today.

The third episode that I want to talk about today is the shortest, and the most inchoate, because of course I am still in the middle of it. I don't know where it began, and I have no idea where it will end. As I've said to you before, I am a 45-year-old lawyer, an American historian and a law professor of some note, with perhaps an interesting biography. But I am still not sure what I have accomplished in the world. I started getting this feeling a couple of years ago, and it is growing stronger. Yes, I know. It seems odd. I said this to a student last month and she said: "How can you be a tenured professor at Harvard Law School and not feel as though you have accomplished enough?" But nonetheless I feel it. I feel a sense that there is more to accomplish professionally, and that there is certainly much more for me to accomplish to do something useful in the world, and to make it a better place. I don't know where that

feeling will lead me, what it will lead me to do, but I know enough to trust it, to understand that, wherever it leads me, it will be a happier place. I know that by now, I should trust my feelings of discontent.

So there are three examples of how discontent has shaped my life. Before I make your parents nervous, let me emphasize that I'm not saying that you should be discontented with what you have accomplished. I remember well the incredible hard work and personal sacrifice that goes into finishing a college degree, and also the sense of euphoria you have when you're finished. Of course, just yesterday news accounts carried even more reports of how difficult the job market is for this year's college graduates. If Harrisburg University has done its job – and from everything I can see, it has done that job extremely well – you should be well-prepared to go into today's changing and volatile employment market. In that respect, I think that this university's founders stand quite well in the tradition of Anthony Drexel, whose vision of “useful” education set me on the path that I tread today. But I am saying that you should be wary of ever being too comfortable with what you have accomplished, both personally and professionally.

Just as one cautionary tale I should note that Bell Laboratories – my first dream job out of college – no longer exists (at least in the form that made it famous) and that some of my friends from that institution are now laid off and looking for work at age fifty. It seems paradoxical, but when you feel the most content, the most comfortable in the world, the most accomplished, it's time to listen those voices inside you that give you a nagging sense of doubt about the world. They are not always right, but sometimes they are the voice of truth.

Thank you so much for listening, and Congratulations Class of 2010! Let's go celebrate.