

>> KOFI HOPE: And I was sitting in the chair that many of the students are today, receiving one of the Wasser Leadership scholarships.

And so it's great to kind of be full circle and back at Innis College.

Now for the award recipients tonight, all of you are leaders.

Whether you got an academic, or directly leadership scholarship, you are a leader.

And it's amazing to be able to celebrate that.

But it's also important to recognize there is responsibility that comes with that.

A responsibility to use the gifts you have in the short time you,

like all of us have on this tiny, green planet to make this world a better place.

But you also have a responsibility to live to your full potential. You owe it to the world to make manifest the gifts you have.

And I was asked to speak here tonight- well I'm not entirely sure why I was asked to speak here tonight, but I think they asked me come and speak here tonight because I'm an Innis grad and someone who's been able to create some good in the world, and leverage those gifts that I've had. And so I wanted to speak here tonight to share some of the tips or tricks or lessons that I've found over the ten years out from being a U of T graduate about how to make those gifts become manifest in the world.

And so three little jewels I have to share. And they come under the headings of Passion, Service, and Gratitude.

So we'll start with Passion. Um there's a cool TED Talk that I enjoy watching by a guy named Simon Sinek, and it's called "Start with Why?"

Has anyone seen it?

One or two people.

Yeah, it's one of the more watched TED Talks out there.

So take a look, it's a great one.

And what it talks about is the fact that the way to motivate yourself or others to action is to start with "why"; with the deeper passions or beliefs that individuals have.

And so much of what I've learned and read since leaving U of T has reinforced this lesson. That action is driven by emotions more than rational arguments.

That there's an older part of our brain, a deeper part of our consciousness or you can say a part of our soul that works at the level of values and emotions. This is a place where gut feelings come from.

The place where instincts lie.

This is a place that is rooted in our core values and the mental maps we make of how the world should function.

And if you want to be successful as an individual or as the leader of a team, it's not always about making the best academic argument for why some course of action should take place.

It's not about weighing all the costs and benefits, and you know having a fancy quantifiable matrix.

It's about asking yourself, does this align with my values and my passions?

For if you feel motivated and empowered you will work hard.

If you have a team you want to lead, it's not about giving them more money, or breaking down the rational and why they should work hard.

It's about showing them how their work connects to their values.

And that really is my main secret to success.

So you might wonder what does that mean in application?

Well I'll put it this way. I'll give you a little secret.

I only got straight A's once in my entire academic history.

And it's kind of ironic because I ended up still being able to get a PhD at arguably

the world's best university

and getting one of the more competitive scholarships in the world.

And I only did that with one year of kind of straight A's.

But one of the keys to that was that it was an important year.

It was my graduating year at U of T.

But that year was also the year that I was the most busy in extracurricular activities

and other activities than any other.

And so in theory you think that was the year my marks would have suffered.

when I was so involved in everything other than class,

you'd think I wouldn't be able to get the best marks I'd ever received before.

But the trick is, that was the year I was truly living my passion.

You see it was 2005 to 2006, and we had something in the city that year called

The Summer and then the Year of the Gun.

And so many people, so many young people that year

were dying from gun violence in this city.

And the majority of them were young Black men.

And the media was simply demonizing and criticizing these young people.

They were calling them "thugs" and "gangsters."

Make it seem like some alien group had invaded the streets of Toronto.

At the time I was president of U of T's Black Student Association.

And day after day of looking at these faces of these young men in the papers

I said in enough. I got up, I called all the other Black youth organizations

in the city that I knew. I spoke to other sympathetic groups.

I connected with the Toronto Youth Cabinet, the Muslim Students Association,

the student government here, the Canadian Federation of Students.

And we founded a city wide coalition to speak out about violence in the city but also to speak about what the root causes were of that violence.

To say that this was a Canadian issue, involving youth that had been raised in Canadian society and were product of Canadian society's inequalities and injustices. And say as Canadians we all had a role to solve it.

Not with more prisons and more police, but with investing in young people.

That work led to me becoming a national voice on the issue.

I did a speech in Ottawa to Prime Minister Paul Martin, explaining what was happening in the city.

I was able to sit down at tables lobbying with the mayor, Chief of Police, other politicians about what real solutions looked like.

And I ended up spending a lot of time going to high schools and different events talking about what was happening.

That work also included our coalition launching a city wide advocacy campaign, and one of the highlights of that was when we brought a thousand young people from across the city down to the University of Toronto to talk about what was happening and what young people saw as real solutions to that.

All the while this was going on I had a full course load.

So basically I would go to my classes.

In between classes I'd be on the phone talking to the team.

When I got home the first thing I'd do is look through all the organizational emails, send them out, and then pretty much every single night there was either a meeting or an event to go to.

And I forget what you call it now but that little observatory by Hart House?

We spent a lot of nights there till 11, 12, 1 in the morning.

Eating pizza, planning, making things happen.

It was a ridiculous amount of work.

But because it was rooted in my passion and because all the classes I picked that year were also connected to my desire to be a change agent, it all worked out fine.

Today I'm running my own non-profit organization.

And that's also been a ridiculous amount of work.

But because my organization connects with my passions, I've been able to push through and create a successful non-profit from the ground up that has influenced youth all across the city.

So for all of the recipients tonight, when you pick your classes, when you decide what activities you want to do over the school year, always remember, start with your passion.

The next thing I'd say is to remember service to others.

The work I do now has some really tough days.

We had to go to funerals of young people who were in our program.

We've had to support people working through trauma, abuse, incarceration.

It can sometimes be hard, draining work.

And it's work I've been doing in this sector since my late teens.

But you know what, about a year and a half ago I was at a concert for a guy that I knew from high school.

And it was cool because a lot of guys from the neighborhood were there and there were a lot of young people that had gone through a youth program that I led in my teens there.

It was a program called Oasis. It was a summer recreation program.

The young people did basketball, games, water fights.

You know, youth recreation. It was cool, it was important,
but I didn't think it was a huge impact. And as I was standing around one of the young
men came to me and said "Hey Kofi how you doing?"
And gave me props, pulled me into that you know, "man hug" we do without fully hugging.
And he looked down at me and said "Kofi, that program saved my life."
And when I heard that a lot of things started to make sense.
I thought about all those years of work on weekends, of volunteering,
of turning down opportunities that could have paid more or made more prestige.
And it all made sense.
You know in social justice work you rarely know the impact of what you've done.
But the young man's comments had me realize
that there are many more young people who'd been impacted through the work I'd done.
And there's this beautiful verse in the Quran says
"To save one person's life is like to save all humanity."
And so to hear one person say that I'd done that felt really good.
So for our award winners, when you graduate all of you will be going to different places;
research, business, law, academia.
But remember that no matter where you go, you are privileged.
Even if you had a past of hardship,
you are a student at Canada's most prestigious university.
Doors will be opened to you that most people in the world can never dream of.
Now don't feel guilty about that, don't feel ashamed.
But use what you have to create opportunities for others.
And you can do this in any sector,
it doesn't have to be simply when you graduate and go and work in non-profit.

And you can volunteer. But also in your future work places, you can mentor others, you can support those who've had less opportunity, you can speak out when you see practices that are discriminatory or unfair, and you can make your work about improving the lives and work of those around you.

Not only that, as I've found out you don't have to wait to graduate to serve others.

You have an incredible platform to do that right now as a student at U of T.

Trust me, at the end of the day, that fact, knowing that you served others means more satisfaction than any prestige, any power, any money, or even any high marks can give you.

I've been very blessed to work in a job where I have a quite good salary, I've had media coverage, I've been on the cover of the Toronto Star, I've been on Canada AM, gotten the Rhodes Scholarship, but really, other than becoming a father, nothing has meant more in my life than those few times I've been able to recognize how my work has transformed the lives of others.

Finally gratitude.

For us Type A personalities, for us hyper competitive get it done types, it's very hard to be satisfied.

There's this kind of driving force within us, always pushing us to do better, to get more awards, to get more accolades, to improve ourselves.

Now it is a source of strength, but it can also be a source of loneliness, of dissatisfaction, even at worst, depression.

Because there is always more. No matter how high you reach, there's always someone who's doing better. No matter what you achieve you always realize there's more that you could achieve.

And passion is important, and service is important, but I've learned the hard way

that gratitude is key. To wake up every day and count your blessings

Not think about what you still have to do.

To whenever you feel like you haven't done enough, or there's more to do

or when you feel down, simply stop and list in your mind

all the things you have to be thankful for.

And to then live a life of gratitude. To never hesitate to thank the mentors,

parents, teachers, friends, who've helped to get you where you are.

All of you award recipients have achieved so much and will achieve much more.

But you didn't do it alone. And through gratitude you let go of the burden

of thinking you always have to accomplish things as an individual.

By recognizing that all of us who reach heights

did so by standing on the shoulders of giants.

And it's never too late to be grateful.

I'll give you an example. In my pocket is a letter. And I'll confess something.

So as I mentioned, in 2006 I received a Wasser Leadership Scholarship.

And I was told quite dutifully to write a letter of thank you

to the family for the award. I'm ashamed to say I didn't do it.

And I won a lot of awards that year. And I never stopped to write any letters,

I just kind of pushed forward.

Well today I've corrected that. This afternoon at work I wrote a letter to the family,

thanking them for that scholarship and that award.

I was planning on giving it to them tonight.

I know they're not here but I'm sure it will get on to them.

But I ask that all of you award recipients learn from my lesson.

Always follow your passion, it will give you the fuel to push forward.

Always remember those without, and as you climb to new heights use that position to help those below.

But most importantly, always make time to show your gratitude to those who helped you along the way.

Thank you and congratulations.

[Applause]