

Address by Chuck Boylen, Professor of Biology
2013 David M. Darrin '40 Counseling Award Winner
Deliver at the Spring 2013 Phalanx Honor Society Tapping Ceremony
April 26, 2014

For me, today is the capstone to a very special year as the 2013 recipient of the David M. Darrin Counseling Award. It has been a year of recognition of my life's work with Rensselaer students and dozens of well wishes from students, staff and alumni. I thank Phalanx for the honor you have bestowed on me. My last "official" duty is to publically offer my congratulations to the new members of Phalanx and White Key being "tapped" today.

Since 1912 Phalanx has represented the "cream" of the Rensselaer student body. That tradition continues with today's inductees. You are now a member of one of the most coveted organizations at Rensselaer. Individually and collectively – the Rensselaer community expects great things from you. Real leadership is a combination of skill and a sense of humanity. To some, they have a knack for it and it is readily recognized in them. For others, it is a talent to be nurtured.

The Darrin Counseling Award is particularly satisfying to me because I knew David Darrin personally. In the early 1970s the Fresh Water Institute was located at the north end of Lake George, directly across from Hague, the Darrin's summer home. During the summers my students and I worked together at the field station. David often came by boat to visit and talk to students and faculty working on "his lake". I like to think that his positive interactions with students and their faculty mentors as the impetus for David to establish the Darrin Counseling Award.

I have built an extraordinary career around students - one that I would not trade for anything. In a perfect world we all want to win, be happy, live without pain. The world does not work that way. As a parent of a Rensselaer graduate, teacher, friend, I cannot shield you from harm or keep you happy. I can, however, admonish you to keep your life balanced. Maintain your academic rigor while you develop your leadership skills. Prepare yourself for the doors that will open for you. I am a product of the 1960s folk music era. I am reminded of a couple lines from a Bob Dylan song recorded by Joan Baez:

"May you always be courageous
Stand upright and be strong
May you stay forever young"

If I may, let me share with you a few pieces of personal advice:

First **be adventurous in your thinking; be creative; dream big**. Who here has read *The Swerve* by Stephen Greenblatt? If you read but one book over the summer break, read this one. The modern world might not exist if there had not been a handful of men in the early 1400s, mostly your age, who scavenged European castles and monasteries salvaging classical texts and manuscripts from absolute certain rot and ruin. The actions of these few and those that followed infused the Humanities with literature and philosophy – centuries long forbidden to read and neglected.

Secondly, **turn your negative thoughts into something positive and move on.** Hold no grudges. One of the most influential people in my life, as perhaps in yours, was my high school guidance counselor. In my day students took standardized IQ tests as high school freshmen. One day I was called into his office to “go over” my IQ score. Mine was sufficiently low, he said, that it did not bode well for my success in college. Instead of college-prep courses, I should go into trade & vocational classes. I left his office that day rather dejected, as you might imagine, but also committed to spend the rest of my life, if necessary, proving him wrong. I am still working on it. I am contemplating going back to school when I retire.

Third, **start a conversation/build a friendship with someone older or younger than yourself.** Such individuals have a much different perspective on life than do you or your peers. I have had some incredible friendships with people outside my own generation.

I recall as an undergraduate at Indiana University, for a couple summers I worked in a research laboratory in my department. I rented a room south of campus and soon found myself most mornings walking into campus with an older gentleman that I would meet up with on the street corner. He was fairly intense in his German manner but very inquisitive about learning what I was working on in the lab, wanting to know all the experimental details. I found myself both intrigued and embarrassed by his curiosity. Somewhat regretfully, my shyness limited my ability for meaningful conversation. When I told my professor about this curious little man with whom I walked to campus, he knew immediately who he was and chided me for not knowing in whose presence I had the privilege of a private audience every morning. His name was Hermann Muller. He was a retired geneticist who had won the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1946 for his work on the effects of radiation on chromosome replication.

If I had only taken the time to listen more carefully, how much more would my life have been enriched. There is knowledge on this campus – and in the world at large – that will never be shared in the classroom. It will die with those who have stories to tell but to no one to whom there is time to listen.

Fortunately the subtleties of those conversations were not totally lost on me. I went on to graduate school, postdoc'd at the NASA – Ames Research Center in California searching for signs of life in lunar dust brought back from the Apollo flights, came to Rensselaer and am proudly standing here today.

Fourth, **be true to yourself.** Live your life with respect and kindness toward others. Maya Angelou once said “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel”.

Lastly, **“Call your Mother”.** A few years ago Thomas Friedman was Rensselaer's Commencement speaker. As an internationally celebrated columnist, his address was full of anecdotes of famous people he had interviewed around the world. But his closing line was most touching when he told the graduating class of 2007, there will come a time when the most important voice you will ever want to hear is your mother's. So I say to you, “Call your Mother”.

Thank you.