

2022 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

DON SHELTON '76



Hello, Vandals! Before we get started, can we all agree that we have the greatest college nickname and mascot of all time?

Thank you, President Green, for your kind introduction. Good morning to the entire University of Idaho leadership team, faculty and staff, and to all fellow Vandals. Welcome, family, friends and guests. Please join me in congratulating the University of Idaho's graduating class of 2022! I am so honored to be here today.

A commencement speech is supposed to be a soaring tribute full of inspiration, uplifting words that tell graduates to go out into the world, believe in yourselves and do great things!

But I want to warn you: This won't be that kind of speech. Before President Green walks up here and pulls me off the podium, let me explain.

The reason I can't give that kind of speech is simple: How can I possibly inspire you when all of YOU have been inspiring ME for two years?

You arrived in Moscow two, three, four or more years ago expecting a college experience every young person dreams about – at this gem of a university, in this remarkable, little college town, in this special corner of the Pacific Northwest. You prepared for one of life's first great tests. But the true test was something no one saw coming. A little thing called a world-wide pandemic happened. You had to adjust to something unimaginable. You faced Zoom classes, facemasks, social distancing, quarantines, variants, vaccinations, and those nose-numbing, brain-bruising COVID tests – lots and lots of those damn COVID tests!

Let me say it again: YOU inspired ME!

That wasn't all you were up against. You also faced an economic shutdown, a contentious election and social upheaval. This was the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918, the Great Depression of the 1930s and the social unrest of the 1960s – all at once. And that craziness was magnified by social media and a 24/7 news cycle.

You may have felt like quitting. At times I'm you probably felt hopeless and helpless, anxious and angry. But here you are.

You didn't give up, you stayed focused and you kept battling. And it brought you here, on this spring day to bask in an achievement even more worthwhile because you had to fight through so much.

I'll say it again: YOU inspire ME!

Now let me take you on a trip back in time. Come with me back to my college days – way back – not 30, not 40, but almost 50 years ago. Are you with me? Can you see my platform shoes, neon red bell-bottom pants, flared collars and shaggy hair? Please ignore all that. Forget the black-light posters on my wall and the lava lamp on my desk. Beyond my questionable fashion and decorating choices, I have the first of two confessions to make: My college experience was easier than yours.

I arrived here as the War in Vietnam wound down. We certainly had deep social, political and racial divisions in our country. We also had the Watergate break-in and the Pentagon Papers. Journalists covered it all, and revelations by investigative reporters about Watergate led to the resignation of a U.S. president. Holding those in power accountable and telling the truth is why I was drawn to journalism in the first place.

It is also said that journalists write the first draft of history. We document events so that 50 years from now, people will know what really happened. That's also what journalists are supposed to do.

Before I retired after 43 years as a journalist, I was able to see and document some amazing things. I shook hands with a president, covered the eruption of Mount St. Helens, coordinated coverage of Super Bowls and Winter Olympic Games. I was lucky enough to lead the largest newsroom in the Pacific Northwest. On my first election night as executive editor of The Seattle Times in 2016, someone few thought would be president won the election.

But just as amazing as what we covered was how we started covering it. I saw the newspaper medium morph from something you typed on a piece of paper and picked up from your doorstep to something delivered instantly over social media and the internet to everyone's PCs, tablets or smartphones.

None of that existed nearly 50 years ago when I first strolled down Hello Walk from my Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house at the corner of University and Elm to my 8 a.m. French class at the Administration Building. It was beyond the comprehension of an 18-year-old kid from Fruitland, a small farm town in Southern Idaho.

I thought I knew it all back then. I thought I knew what the world would be like in 50 years, what changes would be coming in my lifetime. I didn't.

I thought I knew how special this university was four years later when I sat where you sit in a cap and gown – and a lot darker hair. I didn't.

I thought I knew how special this place was after I left, stepped out into the world and quickly realized that an Idaho graduate is just as smart, just as prepared and just as capable as anyone. I still didn't.

No, I didn't really understand how special this university was – and still is – until I came back. Until I got an unexpected gift – a do-over.

Three years ago I retired and asked myself what was next. What would my next chapter be? I loved teaching and mentoring, so I decided to teach college journalism. And I loved it. Then I got the ultimate gift – the chance to shape future journalists at the institution that helped shape me. I love that even more.

I am so fortunate to be writing the next chapter of my story here at the University of Idaho. This was where I made lifelong friends and learned that a first-generation college student from a small town in Idaho – who made some very questionable fashion choices – can do just about anything.

So here's my second confession: I am ashamed to say that I was an absentee Vandal for too long – 30 years. I was so busy with my career and family that I forgot where I came from. Sixteen years ago I returned and reconnected with my fraternity and this university. Only then did I realize what I had missed. Don't make the mistake I made. You're always a Vandal. Come back. Give back. You'll be repaid ten-fold.

Let's go on another shorter, trip. Almost two years ago, on my first day as an adjunct professor here, I took a detour. I walked back to the corner of University and Elm, where my Fiji fraternity house still overlooks the steps of Hello Walk. Almost 50 years after my first class, I again strolled down that tree-lined path to the first Journalism class I would teach at the Administration Building. I had come full circle. I was 18 years old again – without the loud pants and platform shoes.

It was surreal. Just as surreal as standing in front of you – hundreds of newly minted University of Idaho graduates. Some of you were in my classes. Some of you live in the same fraternity house I lived in. Some of you passed me on Hello Walk. Like I said, it's surreal – a special gift. Just like you.

But you're more than that. Today I stand before you looking at the first draft of history. In case you don't realize it yet, that's you. All of you.

The past two years I watched you weather a pandemic, heard your outrage over social injustice and felt your anxiety about the future of our democracy, our nation and our planet.

Have I mentioned how much YOU inspire ME?

I believe you are uniquely qualified to take what you learned here about yourselves – and about each other – and go out into a changed, uncertain world. It will allow you not only to adapt to that world, but help change that world and make it into a better place. You will be tested again, of course, but believe in yourself! You've already proven you can conquer your fears and whatever life throws at you.

Take it from me – the kid in the platform shoes and loud pants who once pounded out stories on a typewriter – change is a given.

This is an historic moment for the university we love. The past two years have changed not only us, but this institution. You and I have watched it unfold: A new president who understands what it means to be a Vandal. A leadership team and faculty facing tough decisions but making the right choices. You students brave enough to conquer your fears and go out into the world. All of us are redefining what it means to be an Idaho Vandal. I've never been prouder!

I think you graduates are history makers – the first draft of history, if you will. You wrote Chapter 1 by simply getting here today.

But this, my fellow Vandals, is only the beginning, just your first chapter. When the story you are writing is woven into the rich history of this great university, yours will be one of the most remarkable chapters of all.

And I, for one, can't wait to read it.

Congratulations to you – the newest members of our Vandal graduate family! Thank you for inviting me here today to share in your special moment.

But, most of all, thank YOU – again – for inspiring ME.

Go, Vandals!