Anna Eleanor Roosevelt Remarks

Thank you! Good morning to you: Trustees, Chairman Doiron, President Ripich, Mr. McCarthy, Faculty, Staff, Friends and Families of the nearly 1500 graduates!

To you, The University of New England Class of 2015, I say: The world needs you. The world needs your knowledge, your curiosity, your energy, and commitment - and your open heart. The world, within the walls of this building and far beyond – to places unknown to us depends on each of us connecting with others and with our natural world in an ecosystem of care.

When we think of an ecosystem, we typically think in terms of science – biology, ecology and the like. Yet, as human beings we ARE an integral part of it; our dignity derives from the system. It doesn’t exist off to the side somewhere. For too long, we, as Western thinkers, have ‘silied’ our perspectives. We’ve disengaged from the notion of being part of a whole system. We need to redefine ourselves as part of an ecosystem, so that we can see the interconnectedness of what we do - and how we live – with how others, and our world itself, thrives... Or not.

The world depends on each of us to keep thinking about, caring about, considering, the implications that our decisions and actions have on our economy, our environment and our neighbors. This world depends on each of us to solve problems in ways that don’t threaten the earth’s resources – including the people who live on this earth. In fact, it means building these resources up! It means redefining success from a single bottom line of individual economic success to a triple bottom line that integrates people, natural resources and financial stability – and meaning it.

This way of thinking is a positive force in the world. It forces us to think of others – first, reaping benefits along the way. Research on altruism “thinking of others” tells us that it makes us healthier if we are engaged in a sharing environment, as opposed to a self-focused environment. Giving of ourselves also makes us happier: giving of ourselves, leads to a happy life. Thinking of others – and the world around us – helps us to see
opportunities embedded in human problems and to develop corresponding solutions. Isn’t that innovation? Solving problems for people and the world advances our civilization.

I want to tell you the story of Goodwill’s founding – it is grounded in this kind of thinking: In the late 1800’s Edgar Helms, a Methodist minister serving in the settlement houses of South Boston, saw, as we now say “new Americans” who were lacking in basic essentials: food, and clothes, housing - dignity. No one wanted to hire them. He wanted to help – more than help, actually – he wanted to find solutions that changed their lives.

He went with horse and buggy and burlap bags to the homes of Beacon Hill. From their generosity he clothed those in need. Yet he saw that giving away the donated goods didn’t solve the root problem. People were still broke, hungry, and unemployed. They needed a way to provide and care for their families – they needed jobs, and those were scarce.

So he invented a business. Edgar Helms created Goodwill jobs out of those donated goods – collecting, sorting, repairing and selling. In turn, those jobs gave individuals and families who had come to this nation with high hopes – yet who had been barely holding on – a real chance to build their new lives and become active participants in their community. A job – work – is the means to community engagement; and to dignity. Then, and now, there is dignity in work. All work. Edgar Helms’ initial approach to address the issues facing the community didn’t lead to the change he’d envisioned, so he kept at it. Over one hundred years later we see the vibrant not-for-profit, social enterprise at work through the 165 independent Goodwill organizations throughout North America. Our Goodwill is just ONE of those Goodwills, and we serve communities in Maine, New Hampshire and northern Vermont. Goodwill’s system of donated goods leading to retail sales and repurposed goods works today: it reduces waste, creates jobs and helps to fund health care and workforce services in our region. When I joined Goodwill in 2011, I saw in the organization’s work, a commitment to shared dignity. It came from Goodwill’s earliest days. The digging deep and “getting hands dirty” kind of commitment to every person’s right to personal stability and engagement in their community, THROUGH WORK. Vibrant communities reflect a thriving and diverse workforce. All that we do at
Goodwill integrates the notion that WORK is the centerpiece to a healthy community – and a happy, satisfied, stable life for us all.

We are really lucky to have Ned Helms, grandson of Goodwill’s founder, Edgar Helms as our Board Chair. We’re lucky not only because of the unique connection and laser-like mission focus that he brings to us, we benefit greatly from his professional expertise as the Director of the Institute for Health Policy and Practice at the University in New Hampshire. These are his words: “People in another room. How healthy are they? There are three things we would want to know: Their level of training and education; their job status and rewards; and their housing and comfort.”

Through our own work at Goodwill, we are now clearly seeing how the social determinants of health drive how we help people build stability in their lives. We’re focused on three of these determinants: Access to Education and Training, Safe Housing and Employment/Job Satisfaction. These are critical factors that we can influence, and change.

When we look to the definition of Health provided by the Institute of Medicine, this is what they say: “Health is a state of well-being and the capability to function in the face of changing circumstances.” Think about what that really means: examples of changing circumstances. Our work at Goodwill of Northern New England revolves around helping people navigate their changing circumstances so that they can build stability and joy in their lives.

Those three social determinants of health: training and education, job preparation and work, and housing and support are Goodwill’s sweet spot.

Yes, our stores are where you start, and our work starts. But, it moves forward through our neuro-rehab services. Residential and day services for folks with disabilities have evolved into a single health care services unit: providing quality care, rehabilitation, training, jobs and financial stability. Our workforce services prepare young people and adults through a holistic and integrated way for the rigors and rewards of the world of work, while connecting others, who need specialized skills, with industry specific
training.

Graduates, as you go forward in the world, I encourage you to embrace an ambition that serves a higher purpose. It means making a habit of considering alternatives to business as usual. As you take the time to develop questions about practices and behaviors out of a desire to continuously improve the way in which you work, you’ll find innovative ways to approach situations. This approach leads to new ideas, further questions – and discovery – that promise to move us all further toward solutions, great and small, that build our community – and our world.

My grandmother wrote You Learn by Living in 1960. Yet 50 years later a young woman who looked nothing like the young women of the 1950’s told me she read it every day.

“I honor the human race. When it faces life head-on, it can almost remake itself. One’s philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes. In stopping to think through the meaning of what I have learned, there is much I believe intensely, much I am unsure of. But this, at least, I believe with all my heart: In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.”

Pretty good advice – for all of us. Don’t you think?

Yes, the world needs you, graduates. UNE has prepared you. They’ve connected you. For life. Make it a good life. One that you love!