

New College of Florida Commencement Speech

by Ron Christali

Good evening graduates, faculty, families, friends, and my fellow alumni of New College of Florida.

“Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.”

Those words are often attributed to President Ronald Reagan.

And whether spoken by Reagan, Jefferson, Madison, or Lincoln, the principle behind them is undeniably true.

The liberties that define this nation — the freedoms to speak, to think, to worship, to challenge authority, and to pursue opportunity — did not appear by accident.

They were imagined by imperfect but extraordinary people, debated fiercely, written carefully, and preserved repeatedly by generations willing to sacrifice for something larger than themselves.

As a history graduate of this institution, I learned something important very early from professors like Lasso Demé, Justus Doenecke, and Lee Snyder:

History is not merely the study of the past.

It is the study of human choices.

And every generation eventually faces the same question:

What kind of society will we leave behind?

Today, as graduates of New College, you inherit more than a diploma.

You inherit responsibility.

And because you chose New College — a very special and very distinctive place — that responsibility is even greater.

Now, I realize commencement speeches are supposed to include at least one cliché, so here it is:

You are the future.

But the truth is, you are also the present.

Right now.

Tomorrow morning.

And I'd like to tell you a story about something that happened to me when I was a student here.

At the time, I worked in a photo lab developing pictures.

Yes, there once was a time when people actually had to develop photographs.

The photo lab was connected to a video store — another historic concept where people rented videocassettes to watch movies.

The woman who worked there was named Linda, and we worked side by side almost every day for months.

I was about 19 years old.

Linda was in her mid-30s.

One day she came into work late. Her hair was messy, her eyes were swollen, and she looked devastated.

I asked her, “Linda, is everything okay?”

She paused and said, “I left my husband last night.”

I honestly did not know what to say.

Then she looked at me and said:

“I left him because of you.”

Needless to say, as a 19-year-old, that got my attention very quickly.

And she said:

“No, you misunderstand me.

My husband used to hit me. My father hit my mother. I grew up believing that was simply the way men were.

But then I started working with you.

And I realized not all men were like that.

And I realized I did not want my daughters growing up believing that all men were like that either.”

I remember going home that night and thinking about what she said.

And I realized something profound:

I had impacted someone’s life in a meaningful way simply by being myself every day.

Not through status.

Not through power.

Not through money.

Just through ordinary human interaction.

And that is true for every one of you.

In every meeting...

every classroom...

every business...

every neighborhood...

and every family dinner...

you will shape the culture around you.

Most of the time, it will not happen through grand speeches or historic moments.

It will happen quietly.

Through the way you treat people.

The way you respond to disagreement.

The way you use success, education, influence, or power.

One conversation can restore someone's confidence.

One act of grace can change the trajectory of a life.

I know this personally because people did that for me.

Professors here challenged me.

Friends here shaped me.

This institution shaped me.

And over time, I came to understand something important:

None of us arrive where we are entirely on our own.

That realization should create humility.

But it should also create obligation.

John Adams once wrote:

“Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

Whether interpreted spiritually, ethically, or civically, the point remains powerful:

Freedom requires responsibility.

It requires citizens willing to think before reacting...

to value truth over convenience...

and to defend the rights of people with whom they may deeply disagree.

Graduates, the world you are entering desperately needs people who can think independently, speak courageously, and act honorably.

Not louder people.

Not angrier people.

Better people.

People who understand that freedom without wisdom becomes chaos...

and that education without character becomes dangerous.

So as you leave this campus:

Protect liberty.

Defend open inquiry.

Respect the dignity of others.

Be successful, absolutely.

But also be useful.

And remember this:

Your life will ultimately not be measured by titles, income, awards, or recognition.

It will be measured by impact.

By the people you encouraged.

The integrity you maintained.

And whether the world became even slightly better because you were in it.

Graduates of New College:

Your education has prepared you not merely to make a living...

but to make a difference.

Congratulations, Class of 2026.

And thank you for giving me the honor of speaking with you today.