

Archie Griffin Commencement Speech 2015
May 10, 2015
Ohio Stadium

Graduates, Trustees, Mr. President, faculty members, friends and families of the graduates who have done so much and sacrificed so much to make this possible, I am honored to stand before you.

Today is the greatest day of my life.

Twenty-nine years ago that is how my coach and mentor Woody Hayes began his commencement address to an Ohio State graduating class.

And as I look out at this sea of Buckeyes in caps and gowns, buzzing with elation, perhaps eagerly anticipating the end of my remarks so the party can REALLY start, I am getting a taste of what Woody felt.

It is an extraordinary day in my life, for sure, to address a graduating class here at THE Ohio State University. Soon, I will be leaving my post as head of the Ohio State University Alumni Association, making this opportunity to be here with so many Buckeyes mean even more to me.

The timing is perfect because my son, Adam, is out there in cap and gown. Today goes down as a scarlet and gray lettered day in the history of the Griffin family.

It's special for me because it means the relationship between Adam and me will change forever. And by that I mean: he will stop asking me for money. Well, he will probably keep asking. But, he actually has a job lined up—miracle of miracles!—so it's time to pay your own way, son.

Now, I'm joking—but only a little bit, Adam.

I am not joking when I say that for parents today is bittersweet. Among our graduates today are many who are the first in their family to graduate from college, and I think I know a little bit about how they feel.

For my parents, who never had the chance at higher education, the importance of college was paramount.

My parents grew up rough and tumble in an Appalachian coal mining town in the hills of West Virginia. They came to Columbus seeking a better life, and by the time I was born at University Hospital, the trip north had begun to pay off.

My father worked three jobs most of his life—he was a sanitation worker, a steel worker and a janitor—so he taught us all we needed to know about hard work by the simple eloquence of his example. There was never a question that all eight children would work hard—and go to college.

Let me tell you, all eight of us did go to college—on athletic scholarships—and all eight of us graduated from college.

This accomplishment in the Griffin house was the one that meant the most to my parents.

Whether you are the first person in your family to graduate from college or the 31st, what you accomplish today is meaningful—meaningful for your whole family. And like me many years ago, chances are you are standing on the shoulders of giants in your own family to do it.

Make sure you thank them, whether that is Mom and Dad, Grandma or Grandpa, your Aunt or your Uncle or your coach, teacher or mentor....whomever cared enough about you to help propel you to this day. Thank them all, shake their hands, give them a big hug. This is a special day for your family and loved ones, and I hope you enjoy it with them.

Today is also a blessing for me because all of the graduates become part of my extended Buckeye family. Buckeye Nation is over 500,000 strong, and you take the Ohio State network with you—wherever you go.

Since we are all members of the Buckeye family now, I want you to sit back and relax while I tell you a family story. It's of a time long ago...but a place not so far away.

When I was coming out of high school, and Ohio State was recruiting me, people told me I probably shouldn't go to Ohio State.

They said, "You are too small, too slow. You should go to a smaller school where you are going to get a chance to play." You call those people haters nowadays, right?

Being an athlete, I felt I knew my ability better than anyone else, so I took up the challenge to attend The Ohio State University. It was the summer of 1972, and the first year that freshmen were allowed to play varsity. My goal was simple: Make the team. Prove to everyone I could play here.

I reported to camp and was put at the back of the line. I was on the scout squad -- the guys who run plays against the first team defense.

Our first game that year was against Iowa. Because it was a home game, everyone got to dress—I was happy just to run out on the field, even though there were three of us wearing Number 45 scarlet and gray jerseys.

The game started and we were beating Iowa pretty bad. With the game winding down in the fourth quarter, Coach Hayes decided to give a few freshmen an opportunity to play and put me in. ME. Man, I was so excited; this was my big chance. If I could run for a touchdown or make a big play, I could make the varsity team.

I got in the huddle and they called an 18 sweep—a little pitchout to me going around the right side. We lined up in the I-formation, and as the Quarterback started calling the signals, I got to thinking.

Is the offensive line going to open up a huge hole for me, I wondered? They had been all day long for the other running backs.

Well, the ball was snapped and I did something I should have never done—I focused my attention on the hole I was going to run through. It was a huge hole, the kind of hole you dream about seeing.

So instead of watching the ball, I kept my eyes on that hole to make sure it didn't go anywhere. The quarterback pitched the ball to me, it hit me right in the hands...and I fumbled. And fumbling was THE ONE THING you did NOT do for Coach Woody Hayes.

As you can imagine, Coach Hayes yanked me out of the game, and, as you can imagine, I was crushed with disappointment.

I sat on the bench with my head in my hands.

I remember going home that night and my father, knowing that I was upset, asked me about it. I told him, "Daddy, I don't think I'm going to get another chance to play this year. I'm a fifth-string tailback; my season is over."

But my father, like he would always do, gave me encouragement and told me to keep working hard. "You're just a freshman. You will have plenty of time to get in there and play."

Now, let me interrupt this stroll down memory lane. Let's pause here so we can really roll around in my humiliation.

Here I was barely out of high school, and my career at Ohio State was effectively over, I thought. I had blown it; the haters were right.

I am outlining the depths of my despair so I can tell you this: At some point, you will fumble the ball. You will have a big moment in your life that you will screw up. You will fall on your face, and you will feel like you have done it in front of a stadium full of people.

Growing up in the Griffin household, we used to read a lot from the Bible, and there is a verse in the Book of James that is one of my favorites.

It goes like this: “My brothers and sisters, consider it nothing but joy WHEN you fall into all sorts of trials. Because you know the testing of your faith produces endurance.”

Notice that verse doesn't say *if* you have trials, it says WHEN you have trials. It is simply saying that when you fumble the ball, it is a test of your faith and endurance.

Listen carefully when I say this: Your failures in life do not define you. How you handle that adversity, how you pick yourself up off of the ground and come back the next day is the true measure of your worth.

Some of your classmates faced such a situation on September 6th when Virginia Tech came into this very stadium and beat our beloved football Buckeyes. All was lost, we thought. A season ended before it had properly begun.

Well, someone forgot to tell the guys in Ohio State's locker room. They buckled down and came together to overcome great odds. Overcoming the loss to the Hokies, the season-ending injury of two quarterbacks, the unthinkable, tragic death of a teammate...all while the outside world told them they had no chance at a championship.

Yet, in Dallas, when the clock hit zeroes and the confetti fell, the Ohio State Buckeyes were national champions. And they were there because they believed in themselves, they supported each other, and they didn't let their collective fumble stop them from achieving their dreams.

Learning to embrace failure is an important lesson, but not the only one that matters in life. There is a tendency, I think, when giving a commencement address to say profound things, things that people have never heard before.

But the honest-to-God truth of this life is that the best advice HAS been given before—you've heard it from your parents, your spiritual leaders and your mentors.

You want to be a success in life?

Show up on time.

Be accountable for your actions.

Do what you say you are going to do.

Treat people the way that you want to be treated.

Pay forward. You can never truly pay back those who have helped you, but you can always pay forward to others.

Woody taught all of us that.

And one more thing: listen. Really listen to people. You really can learn so much by simply listening. It's an increasingly lost skill in our hyper-connected, multi-tasking society, which makes it all the more important.

So I'll ask you to listen to me now, as I come back to finish my Buckeye family story.

On that Saturday afternoon in 1972, I had fumbled the ball on my first carry.

I went back to practice that next week. I was still on the scout squad, still taking that beating every week, still on the 5th team.

The next weekend we also had a home game—this time against North Carolina, and so everyone dressed for the game. The contest started, and the Tarheels blocked a Buckeye punt to go up 7-0.

All of a sudden midway through the first quarter, I heard someone calling out Griffin. Kept calling Griffin.

I knew he wasn't talking to me; I was a fifth-string tailback—on the scout squad— and I had fumbled the week before.

But he kept calling out Griffin. I was the only Griffin on the team, so I went up to Coach Hayes.

He grabbed me by my shoulder pads, telling me to get into the game. I was so excited that when I ran onto the field, my teammates called me back. In all the excitement, I had forgotten to take my helmet with me!

I could not believe that he meant for me to go into the game, but there I was in the huddle. I pulled myself together, but to be honest, I was in a daze the whole time.

That afternoon they kept calling plays that gave me the ball. My number was being called, and I was running like I had never run before. When I came out of the game at the beginning of the fourth quarter, the 86,000 fans in the stadium gave me a standing ovation. In those two-and-a-half quarters, I had rushed for 239 yards—an Ohio State record at that time!

I want you all to know that I will never ever, ever forget that moment. It was the most exciting moment I ever had playing the game, and it happened right here on this very field.

Why did it happen? In some ways, I will never know, as I count it as a miracle, a convergence of time and space and opportunity that changed my life forever.

But I DO KNOW a little part of it happened that day because my failure did not define me. Because I kept working hard.

Because I found a joy—a silver lining...no, a scarlet and gray lining—in the test of my faith that produced endurance, and made me better.

Ladies and gentlemen, Ohio State Class of 2015: I wish nothing but the best for you as you walk out the gates of this stadium and into the rest of your life.

I wish you great happiness, great fortune, great peace, and great understanding.

But I also wish something else: I wish for you to have faith that someday when you are my age, you will look back at your fumbles in life and relish the tests you were given.

I wish for you a time when you are down and counted out, and forced to dig deep and come back to show the world who you really are.

I have a feeling that you will get that chance someday, but what you make of it is truly up to you. Now, I KNOW you will handle it, and you will handle it well because you are a Buckeye, that's what we do and that's how we roll!

Again, congratulations to you all.

I leave you now, as I leave you always...with my favorite two words, Go Bucks!