

The Ohio State University  
2024 Autumn Commencement December 15, 2024  
Keynote Speaker: Stephanie Hightower

Thank you. Thank you for that very warm introduction, President Carter.

I am deeply, deeply honored and really excited to be here today. Thank you to The Ohio State University Board of Trustees, President Carter, Ohio State faculty, staff, and alums, and distinguished guests.

Most of all, thank you graduates for allowing me to share one of the most special moments in your life with you and your loved ones.

Now over the next 10 minutes, I am going to make references to historical figures and events. And for those of you who are not history buffs, this is one time I won't be offended when you start Googling on your smartphones to know who or what I am talking about.

I vividly remember my own graduation at The Ohio State University, even if it was a few years ago over at St. John Arena. I spent the day seesawing back and forth between sadness that my college years were behind me, and anxious anticipation for the future ahead.

I expect that you, too, feel happily conflicted today. But no matter your fears or doubts, whatever or whomever opposes you, regardless of your trials, whether riding on success or tripping over failure – it's time to press on.

As James Baldwin wrote, "the only thing that will save us is if we just keep on going and never give up." Let me say that again. "The only thing that will save us is if we just keep on going and never give up."

In other words, my message to you is this: Be Unstoppable.

Unstoppable – as Sia’s song which reminds us to not only succeed, but to look good doing it. She says she’s a Porsche with no brakes; she’s so powerful she doesn’t need batteries to play... she’s confident, unstoppable.

Invincible. It starts with courage and the willingness to be strong in crises. America stands today because we dug deep at key turning points in our history. Take the Great Depression and World War II. It’s hard to imagine now, but just eighty years ago, two million people were homeless, our economy had shrunk by a third, and one in four people were unemployed. Collective loss, hunger, helplessness, and hopelessness... these sowed our seeds of resentment and political instability, feeding fascist movements like the Nazis.

In 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, oddsmakers would have bet against a US victory. We lacked equipment, ammunition, and personnel, not to mention the heart and the stomach for war. But our resilience and our courage took hold. By January 1942 -- one month after Pearl Harbor -- 134,000 men enlisted and, eventually sixteen million served. Over a million of those were African Americans. And, more women than ever joined the ranks abroad and at home, as Rosie the Riveter womaned our factories and became 40% of our workforce.

When we unite as a community and as a nation, we are Invincible, Unconquerable, Unstoppable.

Take these lessons to heart.

And, you know how electronics go, things just go off when you don’t want them to, right? (chuckling) Ahh...

Take these lessons to heart. A crisis is a chance to be a hero. But other people are essential. Together, we can achieve something far greater and more consequential than

ever done alone. Unity calls us to community, but don't ever forget to be inspired by the ferocity and tenaciousness of the individual human spirit.

Consider Anthony Robles, a young man born with only one leg, who, through sheer guts and a lot of perspiration, became a national champion in wrestling.

Robles spent countless, countless hours discovering how to turn his disadvantage into an advantage, using his enormous grip strength developed by clutching onto crutches and a high center of gravity to create new offensive moves. Robles wrote that "my spirit is unconquerable..." A movie about his life premieres next month and, fittingly, it is titled "Unstoppable."

There are many reasons why we humans quit. Sometimes, it's because we don't see a way forward. I experienced this as an Olympic hurdler. I was favored to win a medal at the 1980 Olympics and then the President Jimmy Carter boycotted the games, days before we were set to travel to Russia and compete.

Then fast-forward to the 1984 games in Los Angeles. Sports Illustrated favored me to win a Gold medal. I had the fastest time in world, and had just emerged from an undefeated season... but I placed 4<sup>th</sup> at the Olympic trials, and was the designated alternate.

In my mind, someone else was going to once again wear the medal that should have been mine. So, imagine my reaction when my coach, Mamie Rollins, told me that I should go to an exhibition meet two weeks later.

It was pointless. Like, why not quit? Go home and mope for the summer.

But I went. And I blasted the field, which included the three women who would be running at the LA Games later that month. I learned a life lesson that I still think about even today. You don't run for the gold. You don't run for the time. You run for yourself.

(applause)

The unquenchable thirst for self-improvement – regardless of whether the world sees your achievement or not – that’s what makes you unstoppable.

Ironically, success can get in the way from being unstoppable. When you think you’re on top, we become complacent and arrogant. We lose momentum, or stall completely because we deny that life calls us to much more.

Ohio’s own John Glenn, the first American to orbit the earth, knew what it meant to never stop improving. John served in two wars, circled the earth in a bucket with less technology than what I’m using up here, returned to space at the age of seventy-seven, and won four terms in the United States Senate.

But mid-career he was rejected from an advanced flight-training program that would lead to his service as an astronaut. He had not completed college-level calculus.

He could have walked away. After all, he was a decorated war veteran. What did he need to prove to anyone? Instead, John promised the admissions panel that he would spend every night mastering calc– and he did. He understood that real excellence is not achieved as a one and done moment. It’s instead a lifelong moving target.

He also valued the brilliance of others – no matter their race or their gender. That’s why, when his life hung in the balance returning to earth from his six orbits, he chose a Black female named Katherine Johnson to calculate his way home. Watch the movie Hidden Figures if you would like to learn more about Katherine Johnson and other Black female scientists at NASA.

Katherine and John, they were unstoppable. And you can be too.

As I prepared for this speech, I was reminded that my coach often motivated me by daring me. (pause) She would dare me by telling me what she thought I could not do. When she said things like, “you can’t go fast” or “you’ll never cut that amount of time off your personal best” or “you don’t have a chance to beat that tough opponent,” her negativity galvanized my competitive spirit, reminded me to stay humble, and focused with a clarity unobscured by insignificant distractions.

Today, more than ever, we need unstoppable people -- people who believe in a cause greater than themselves, and are willing to look past the issues that divide us to find the greater good that unites us... people willing to dedicate themselves to constant hard work, disciplined self-improvement... those who like Nike, just to do it... those who remain humble and find ways to value and harness the talents and the gifts of other people...

So let me emulate Coach Rollins and challenge each of you.

I bet you’re too self-absorbed. You won’t make a difference in the world.

I bet you will cop out rather than dig deep. You won’t seek to understand and respect opinions different from yours.

I bet that you expect the world to be easy; that you will be shocked when it’s not. You won’t work your tail off to be good enough for it.

I bet you won’t look -- and you won’t take a hard look at yourself and push yourself to challenge for better. You won’t cultivate enduring relationships.

Now... Prove me wrong. Accept the challenge. Let the world know that you are our next great generation.

Be unstoppable.

Thank you.

(applause)