

## 08/11/12 Terry Stewart's Ohio State University Summer Commencement Speech

On our way here today, I was talking with my beautiful wife, Sally, and we reminisced about some of the great things I've experienced, and how fortunate I've been that my life didn't go as planned....'cause it sure turned out good.

Given what I've got to say today, it's ironic or just plain bizarre that inside the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, there's an exhibit on the history of the music videos which includes an opera piece from Carl Orff called *Carmina Burana*. In English, the lyrics translate to "O Fortune. You are changeable." I pass this along 'cause what I want to impress upon you today is that your fate is malleable. Your path may take many twists and turns and, in the end, it's likely to be much different than what you originally planned. But ultimately, it's in your hands.

For instance, the last thing I could ever imagine is addressing a graduating class at The Ohio State University. And, for those who are old enough and given that I'm from LA, lower Alabama, you should know that I am concerned that the avenging spirits of both Woody Hayes and Bear Bryant might take me out just for being here. That said, thank you for inviting me here today. I am deeply honored.

Believe me that it's not lost on me that you'd rather have Jay Z or BONO up here waxing eloquently. Instead, you got the old fart who takes care of their stuff. So bear with me. But come to think about it, how out of place can I be speaking at an institution that immortalizes "*Hang On Sloopy*" every chance it gets.

Let me also say that I am not oblivious to what many of you are facing as you head off to the next stage of your life.... the worst job market in decades, huge student loans, and the possibility of moving back home to make ends meet. Of course, I can't make that all disappear, but what I can try to do is provide you with a rudimentary GPS that, in some small way, may help you navigate this ominous landscape.

Before we go any further, here's a little tutorial on where I came from. I literally grew up in what is colloquially referred to as a "wide spot in the road" in nowhere Alabama. From my earliest memories at age three, music was paramount. I spent more time listening to the radio than I did playing with other kids. It was an almost DNA-like connection to artists and records. Between begging my Mom and Dad to take me to shows or buy me the latest 45 RPM hit, I nearly drove my folks nuts. As the years passed, my obsession naturally spelled over into the bigger world of pop culture, especially comic books and movies.

This pre-occupation completely befuddled my poor Father. Time and again, as I grew older, he would say to me, “Son, what you gonna do with all those records and comic books?” I would always answer simply; “Iontno, but they make me happy”.

I’m providing you with this background so you can understand how disconnected I became from whom I really was. All I could hear ringing in my ears were the fears and convictions of my parents, only one of whom graduated from high school. It was essential and non-negotiable that I have a college degree to forever assure me of a good job making good money. Given the struggles they encountered, it was strictly about economic security. Happiness was secondary or would naturally follow.

So before I knew it, I had four degrees: two undergraduates, a Bachelor of Science in Engineering and a Bachelor of Arts in Education from Rutgers University and a MBA in Finance and JD in Law from Cornell University. Imagine, ten years of higher education and none of these degrees meant much to me. In fact, somewhere along the way, I decided that my only goal was to go to my tenth high school reunion without ever having had a full-time job...and I did. Brilliant, eh?

Some of my friends in college were creative, confident, and pursued their passions. That was incomprehensible to me. I tried engineering. I was a banker. I traveled the world doing mergers and acquisitions. By almost all standards, including financial rewards, I had it made. However, none of this connected with me in any meaningful way. I couldn't see a road to any righteous future. I kept chasing money and titles.

And as much as I knew that this wasn't for me, I kept following someone else's dream and pursued a safer path. I wasn't yet ready to embrace the simple concept that you really have to do what you love.

Today, I am here to let you know that it all boils down to passion. Make sure that this is your guide in whatever you do and you'll be ten times better at that than anything else you'll ever pursue in your life. You'll care more about it and you'll live and breathe it every moment of every day. In turn, the money will likely follow, and equally importantly, it will point the way to a more fulfilling life.

I know that you may have heard this all before, but I am a living testament to this reality. Let me continue.

Admittedly, it took me too long to realize all of this. I hated my job. I was miserable, except in my off hours when I was doing what really floated my boat...music, movies and comics books.

So what happened? I'll tell you. I lost my job, got divorced and had no place to live. So what did I do next? Many of you won't be surprised, I decided to go to a bar and have an adult beverage...or maybe two. And believe it or not, the bartender heard me talking to a friend about my situation and offered me a place to live. The other good news was that he owned the restaurant, loved to cook and he hated to eat alone, so I didn't starve either.

For almost a year, I searched for another job in mergers and acquisitions, and then a friend who was working with a headhunter and knew about my passion for pop culture told me that Marvel was looking for someone to be President who had a noteworthy business background and who actually read comics. As I always tell this, there was me and a guy in Utah...it was a small pool of candidates. I got the job.

So here I was, 44 years old and Spiderman's boss. Boy was I lucky and boy was I terrified. I was immersed in something I loved but charged with running an enterprise for the first time in my life. What I couldn't see at that moment was that all of my experience and education, combined with my passion and knowledge of comics had put me in a position to really succeed for the first time.

I really believe philosophically that life turns out for the best as long as you're doing most of the right things. It's often not what you thought it would be. It's some left turn in the middle of nowhere that leads you to wash up on some beach that you could barely get a glimpse of in your binoculars.

You all have your degrees. You've heard about the role of passion and dreams, and now we need to talk a little about taking risks.

The hardest thing in all of this is that first step, taking that leap. And that's where you all are today. You have to decide for yourselves how far out on the limb you're gonna go.

What should be reassuring though and what you probably can't understand is that, career wise, you are all bulletproof and immortal where you stand today. You really are! You're young. You're educated and you're entering a world in flux with new opportunities and new ideas emerging constantly.

When you get right done to it, you've got time to correct almost any mistake you might make. You've got the tools. The piece that you might be missing is the intestinal fortitude to get going. Let me help.

The real key is to get started. Focus on taking action and march towards it. Don't avoid it. There's no time frame associated with this stuff. You could spend 10 years trying new things and most of you would

still be no older than 35. Careers can still take off at 35. I've had an extraordinary ride, and it all happened later in my life.

I know that many of you are scared about your future. The world today doesn't spawn confidence for most. But trust me, confidence will come over time. It's inside you and throwing yourself into a difficult or frightening situation and surviving will bring it to the fore. You'll leave here today with a great degree and education. Your fortune is yours to define.

Now all of this would be a pretty good story about me if it ended here. But, it didn't and it actually got better.

After a wonderful run at Marvel, I spent a couple of years piddling with various projects that failed the passion test and left me adrift again. Once more, fate smiled on me. I had a friend who called and told me about a short piece in the Wall Street Journal about a job at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. I read the Journal every day of my life, but for whatever reason, I didn't that day. And as they say, the rest is history.

Yes, luck played a role again, but this time I now truly grasped how crucial it was that I obtained this position. So much so, that I offered to "crawl on my belly from New York to Cleveland" and, if need be, "work for free."

I really do believe that everything I had done up until that point led me to my position as CEO of the Rock Hall. All those years of collecting records, listening to music, seeing live bands and studying the history of the music – as well as my training in the business world – prepared me for my greatest opportunity and my greatest success.

As much as I love comic books, my overriding passion for music has served me even better at the Museum for the last fourteen years. To be blessed with playing some small role in preserving the music that changed my life, as well as altering the culture and the history of the world cannot be expressed in words.

How do I sum this all up? Well, let me take a stab at it with a quote from the famous psychologist, Carl Jung, "*I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become.*" In other words, jump into your new life! Take a plunge. Make decisions and correct them when you feel that they are wrong. Always remember, there is little, if any, satisfactory recourse for indecision.

Embrace the challenge of today and take risks! Look to be fascinated and intrigued in all that you do. Then maybe one day you will quote **me** and say when asked, *"I never go to work 'cause everyday is a weekend."*

You are young and you can change your mind. Live a life of unlimited possibilities and driving passions. Stay true to yourself and what makes you happy. My son, Patrick, who's here today, is a musician. After a recent gig, a paying one I might add, he turned to his Mom and said, "that was so much fun that I want to do it for a living!" This made me smile and gives me hope that in his few short years, he has already come to realize the import and the truthfulness behind my message to all of you.

With that, I'll leave you with a guarantee. **Your** rock and roll, comic book life is out there waiting for you. Go find it and do not settle for anything less!