

University of Michigan School of Public Health Commencement Address
by Marianne Udow, April 27, 2007

Today is a day when I hope that you feel great pride in your accomplishments and great excitement about your future. Graduating from the School of Public Health is a wonderful achievement and I guarantee that what you have learned here will enrich you throughout your life. Though this is a day to look forward, I want to take a few minutes to also help you look back: actually, to look back from a future point in your life.

At some point, I guarantee that you will face the question of what it means to live a good life. You will think about the choices you have made and you will wonder whether you should have pursued a different path. You will think about why you get up every day – what motivates you to keep going, or, better, what is it that helps you to embrace life? Today, you have many alternative paths you could follow. I hope that you make those choices with some consideration of what you might think about when you get to that point in your life when you are reflecting back.

So, ok, what does it mean to live a good life? In the end, my proposition is fairly simple, though achieving it is harder than it might seem. So, to get to the end right now, I believe that life is all about the connections we make with others and whether or not we feel we have made a contribution in the world – in small or big ways. Quite simply: living a good life is not about status, prestige, titles or money. It is about doing good with and for others.

Now, I told you that my proposition was fairly simple but that it was harder to achieve than to conceptualize. Simple, because we all have connections all the time with lots of people and we are always doing something that affects others in the world. Harder than it seems, however, because the messages we get in our daily life take many of us in a totally different direction. After all, we live in a very materialistic society. We also live in a society that values status, title and position disproportionately. We are constantly given messages that we have to be “the top” or we have failed. Or, we are told that we have to have certain things or a certain income or we can’t be happy. Too many times when I ask someone what they want to achieve, they tell me that what they want is to be a CEO or a Vice President of this or that. Those responses make me sad because they say nothing about what someone actually wants to accomplish in the world. Why would someone want to be CEO or some other high level? For what purpose? If it is all just about power and title, then I fear these individuals will look back and feel a void in their lives. After all, very few people become CEO’s and if that is your aspiration, you are likely to be disappointed. Very few people become billionaires and if that is your aspiration, you are bound to be disappointed. And even if you do become a CEO or other high level person but do it just because you want power and prestige, the achievement is likely to be an empty one.

In my own case, I have always done my best work and been most gratified when I have been in jobs where I felt I could walk out the door tomorrow and I would be ok. Too many people get trapped into a feeling that they have to stay where they are; too many people feel they have no choices in life. But, they feel that way generally only because they are trapped in the need to acquire more things or to be on a career path they think is what they need to be happy. I don't want to dismiss the fact that you do need resources to take care of yourself and your family. But, too often, what we consider "need" goes far beyond what it would really take to live a comfortable life.

So, my advice to you on your graduation day is to think about why you went into public health in the first place and set your goals based on that. What do you most want to accomplish in this world? Make that your mission and take risks and chances on your way to get there.

In my life, I have walked down roads that I never anticipated and have experienced rewards that I could not have conceptualized. I never set out to run the Department of Human Services and if on my graduation day in 1978 someone told me that that was going to be what I was going to do, I wouldn't have believed them. In fact, in 2003 when Governor Granholm asked me to take on the job I have today, I was terrified at the thought. I felt terribly unmatched to the job – after all, my entire background was in what we typically think of as health care and not in human services. I thought the job needed a social worker. But, I decided to take it because if I didn't, I knew I would never have another chance to do something this different and I wanted the challenge.

I have been profoundly grateful ever since. Not because this is an easy job, it is not. Not because this is a particularly well compensated job, it is fine, but nothing compared to compensation for something of this magnitude in the private sector. Not because I have had lots of resources to use on the job to invest and make change. At this time in our state's history, we haven't had many resources to really do what needs to get done. But, rather, I feel blessed with the opportunity I have had because I have been profoundly changed from the experience. I have had the chance to learn from and touch the lives of individuals who live in the most devastated circumstances you can imagine. But who inspire me with their grit and determination every day.

I have seen the courage of one of our clients who was a prostitute and drug user on the streets of Detroit until she was aged 40 and then got pregnant and decided to change her life. She went to a program that helps women like her get off the streets; got clean; got her GED and is now an Americorps volunteer with the same program helping other women get off the street. She helped us write our DHS strategic plan because we learned from her how to better help those living in devastating poverty.

I have seen the strength and the power of our foster youth who after being abused themselves by those who were supposed to keep them safe and nurture them, spent years in what I can only describe as a foster care system that failed them too many times and yet, who have become themselves youth leaders to try and help make the system better for children who follow them into care. These youth have created a board to provide

advice to me and the Department as a whole and their ideas formed the basis for a set of recommendations on strengthening the foster care system that we delivered to the legislature in September last year.

And, I have seen those who live in some of the most devastated neighborhoods in Detroit and other communities around our state not waiting for state, city or federal support but volunteering with energy and pride to establish after school programs or help neighbors live safely or improve the quality of life in their communities even when they have hardly any resources to do so.

And, finally, I have had a chance to know some of our hard working, under-resourced state employees who are routinely criticized in the press and who work for far less than they could earn in the private sector, but who care so much for the clients and fellow citizens that they serve, that they not only work through nights and weekends to make sure children and adults are helped but also go above and beyond by giving up their lunch hours to volunteer in programs like Meals on Wheels.

The fact that you have gone into public health means that you have, by definition, some aspirations to change the world for the better. And, graduates of this school have been doing that for years. Did you know that....

There have been more than 14,000 graduates of the School of Public Health and so many of them have made contributions to the world in small and large ways. In just the 5 years before and after I graduated, we had graduates in every Department who made an impact on others. Just a few examples. We had graduates like:

Larry Brilliant, a 1977 graduate in health management and policy who as a physician worked on eradicating blindness in India and other third world countries and just became director of the Google Foundation; and

Cas Evans, a 1972 graduate in dental public health who from 1998- 2005 who served as director of the National Oral Health initiatives in the office of the U.S. Surgeon General; and

John Henshaw, who graduated from the Department of Environmental Health Sciences in 1974 and served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health from 2001 to 2004. Under his leadership, workplace fatalities dropped to record lows; and

Lora Schwab, who received her master's degree in biostatistics in 1979 and her PhD in 1988, and fellow School of Public Health graduate Mark Becker co-founded Statprobe, today a global corporation providing integrated data services to the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industry; and, last but not least,

Ed Roccella, a graduate of the Department of Health Behavior and Health Education who, in 1982, launched the NIH's High Blood Pressure Education Program that has helped prevent thousands of deaths from stroke and heart disease.

And, of course, the thousands of others who help improve the quality of life of so many others in every state and 85 countries, every day.

These are the role models I hope you will think about as you launch your own career. To live a happy life, you do not need to change everything in the world. But, I do hope you ask the question: How can you help make the world a better place? If you keep your focus on that, I guarantee you that by the time you are looking back on your life you will be able to answer the question, "what is it to live a good life?"

All the best to you on your journey. I know it will be a good one.