

Kevin M. Rampe Commencement Speech
Union College
June 13, 2004

President Hull, members of the faculty, distinguished visitors, friends and families, and graduating seniors of the class of 2004. I am deeply honored and it is a tremendous privilege to be addressing you today. Though I have to admit, my wife, Christine, and I are a little concerned - my first degree at Union took four years, my law degree only three years, but this one has taken sixteen!

Twenty years ago this college decided, belatedly, to accept me as a freshman. You see, originally I was placed on a waiting list for admission to Union. An experience I will never forget. In this purgatory I spent weeks rushing to my mailbox every day, sometimes twice a day, looking for that letter of acceptance - awaiting my fate at the hands of some unknown committee in the hinterlands of upstate New York. Finally, it came. Today, I promise not to keep you here for as long as the admissions committee made me wait.

First of all, Congratulations to the class of 2004! You should be proud of all that you have accomplished. Take this special moment to remember the good times and to recommit your self to keeping in touch with your friends. You have worked hard and today is your reward - enjoy it!

I would also like to congratulate you on your contributions to this year's senior class gift. I understand that 75% of you, the largest percentage ever, have donated. That's fantastic.

As an alumnus of Union College I come to you from the not so distant past. My goal today is to share some of my thoughts, experiences and hopes for you as you leave the safety and serenity of Union.

Without a doubt, things were different when I was here - there were some computers on campus but they were all contained in a few designated computer rooms. Laptops - forget it. The drinking age was 18 and beer flowed freely, and legally, across the entire campus including many late nights at the Skellar. We had a Division III hockey team that beat RPI only once during my four years and - wow - what a night. - - - - - Oh - - - - - and some of the major issues on campus were: Do college students drink too much? Should we have a Greek system on campus? And is the cost of tuition at Union out of control? . . . Well, some things never change.

During my time at Union the cold war was in its final stages, the AIDS virus was first discovered in the United States, and the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan.

During your years at Union the world has also undergone unprecedented change. You now emerge to rejoin a world much different from the one you left. You entered in 2000, just in time to bear witness to the closest presidential race in our nation's history. In 2001, nineteen terrorists carried out the worst terrorist attacks on domestic soil. Our nation embarked on a war on terror that sent tens of thousands of young Americans first to Afghanistan and then, a year later, to Iraq. In fact, as I stand here today we have young men and women, many of them your age, facing danger. Whatever your feelings may be about either war, these young men and women deserve our support as they serve our country.

Up to this point, your life and what you have achieved has been defined by your education, your test scores and your summer experiences.

Starting tomorrow, your life and your happiness will be defined by the choices you make.

You are graduating during a time of uncertainty as our nation faces serious challenges.

We are a nation at war, both at home and abroad, against an enemy bent on destroying our way of life. And we are a nation divided over the right solutions to the myriad domestic and foreign problems facing us as a people.

However, we are also a nation defined by the freedom to choose and rooted in democratic institutions dedicated to ensuring that our government remains accountable to the people. You are graduating at a time when, as a result of technological advances and increased globalization, individuals are empowered to make a difference in ways unimagined at any point in our history.

It is a time when choices matter.

Your family, your professors and this college have given you an amazing opportunity. With the education you have received – you can do whatever you want – achieve anything. You have the ability to make a difference. Whether you do make a difference is up to you. Making a difference is a matter of choice.

And I would like to offer some guidance from my experience in making choices. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation was created in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks to oversee the rebuilding of the World Trade Center Site, the creation of a memorial, and the revitalization of lower Manhattan. As its President, I make decisions every day - choices – which impact family members of victims of the World Trade Center attacks, downtown residents, business owners, real estate developers, and numerous government agencies -- all laying

claim to sixteen acres of lower Manhattan. So to begin I want to set forth four principles I follow when making choices.

First, make choices. Make choices wisely, but make them. Far too many people miss great opportunities because they are frozen in place for fear of change.

Don't fear change - embrace it. Tens of thousands of dollars spent on thousands of hours of higher education have been preparing you for this moment. Take a chance. More often than not the worst choice is not making any choice.

Second, in making choices, draw upon your values and experience. Know that gathering information does not prepare you to make a choice. Spend time thinking about your values and your morals. They will help you interpret the information and, in the end, the choices you make should reflect your values.

Third, understand that all of your choices can not be made according to some master plan. You can not plan your life. When I sat in your chair I never imagined that I would return sixteen years later to deliver this commencement address. How I got here is not the product of any plan - it is the result of a series of choices.

And fourth, know at the outset that some of the choices you make may turn out badly. Recognize this and realize that often in the wrong choices lie great lessons. In making mistakes, and learning from them, you will gain deeper personal understanding and knowledge. You will also develop better judgment to assist you in making future choices. While judgment is rooted in your own values, in the end, good judgment only comes from the experience of making mistakes and learning from them.

Along with the right to make choices come certain responsibilities. First and foremost, you have a duty to make choices that improve our world for others and for future generations. You carry this responsibility if only because of the many who did not have the same opportunity. Your family and generations before you worked and, in some instances, fought to give you this freedom. The diploma you receive is not simply an honor bestowed upon you which grants you the right to lucrative employment. It is a document which imposes on each of you a responsibility to undertake some form of public service or involvement in your community. I implore you to honor that obligation. To use all of the tools and knowledge gained from your years at Union to improve conditions for others. The choices are endless and range from service in your everyday life, such as volunteering at your local school or coaching a youth soccer team, to a committed career in public service. No matter how you choose to carry out your

obligation – the choice to help someone else or to make a contribution to your community will lead to a more fulfilling, and happier, life.

Why you? Because history, in its wisdom, has called upon you and because, fairly or unfairly, our world needs you. Let me share with you the stories of two Union alums. These were not people that I knew personally, but I learned about them because they were among the over 3,000 lives lost on September 11th. And as I looked deeper, I found that their lives were dedicated in some form to service and community.

Andrew A. Fredericks was a 1983 graduate of Union. On September 11, 2001 he was in his 20th year as a firefighter and his 11th year serving in Squad 18 as a New York City Firefighter. He was the co-author of the FDNY's "Engine Company Tactics Manual", taught for the New York State Association of Fire Chiefs, and had his own firefighter teaching business. That morning he found himself on the front lines of the worst terrorist attack in our nation's history. In choosing to become a New York City firefighter Andrew chose, many years earlier, to put his safety at risk to save others.

Thomas W. Duffy was a 1971 graduate of Union. A resident of Rochester, on the morning of September 11th he was on the 99th Floor of World Trade Center Tower One for an appointment at Marsh where he was a Senior Vice President. In

addition to having an extraordinarily successful career, Tom chose to spend time giving back to Union as an active Alumnus and he gave back to his community by coaching his sons' sporting teams.

Neither of these individuals knew the tragedy that awaited them on the morning of September 11th. However, what both men knew, and what I hope you take home with you today, is the importance of public service, of giving back to your community. And, it can not be said that either of these men did not live their shortened lives to the fullest. Lives in which they recognized the importance of fulfilling their obligation to community service – and lives made better because they included service to their community as a critical part of their life experience.

History is filled with stories of public service – the fabric of our nation is built on the power of individuals' commitment to helping others. But at no time in our history has the power of the individual been stronger.

After September 11th, thousands felt compelled to undertake some form of public service, to find a way to reach out to those in need – through donations of food, money, clothing and housing, assisting in the rescue and recovery effort, or in the rebuilding itself. That community service is the true legacy of September 11th which you inherit today. That day and its aftermath made it clear that it is not in America's status as the world's sole superpower that we define ourselves,

but in community service and the acts of compassion and kindness we show to each other.

The plan for rebuilding the World Trade Center site itself came from an unprecedented outpouring of citizens' ideas and public sentiment. Millions of people attended dozens of public hearings and workshops or visited the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation's website during our planning for the World Trade Center site and thousands sent in their own plans. The result reflected the views and opinions of the individuals who devoted their time and experience and, ultimately, of the public at large.

When the LMDC launched an international design competition for a memorial to those lost, 5,201 people from 63 countries took the time to submit their design for a memorial. Thirteen distinguished individuals came together as a jury and committed themselves to spending hundreds of hours reviewing the proposals. And thousands provided their thoughts and comments on those components critical to create a lasting tribute to those lost.

I see it every day. The recovery of lower Manhattan is not the brain-child of great political leaders or brilliant architects, although each has played a role. Big businesses have clearly been a part but they alone could not rejuvenate our community. Rather, lower Manhattan's recovery is the result of individuals

volunteering their time, their resources, and their expertise – put simply – giving of themselves.

It is that America which came under attack on September 11th. I want to share two other stories with you – first, one example of an immediate response by a concerned citizen and, second, an example of the ongoing commitment of individuals to the recovery of Lower Manhattan.

Peter Cagnassola, a successful real estate broker and married father of two, served as the Chief of the all volunteer Far Hills-Bedminster Fire Department. On September 12, 2001, he, along with his younger brother Thomas, went to help at Ground Zero where he joined hundreds of other volunteers to work a 12 hour bucket brigade. After hours of exhausting work, they were relieved by still others who picked up where they left off. Two and a half years later, with the exception of his children being born, Peter describes his volunteer work at Ground Zero as the defining moment of his life.

Colleen Galvin, a graduate of the NYU Stern School of Business, first volunteered for ten months to help Lower Manhattan businesses make maximum use of disaster relief programs and then, recognizing their need for further assistance, co-founded MBAs4NYC. Her organization pairs experienced consultants to struggling Lower Manhattan small businesses and through these volunteers,

provides skilled business expertise free of charge. Within one year, Colleen and her 175 volunteers gave in depth guidance to 85 Lower Manhattan businesses. Ultimately, her work helped save the Lower Manhattan small business community.

It really is remarkable; the recovery of our nation's third-largest central business district in a city defined by capitalism is fueled by community service – who would have thought?

While separated by 16 years, you and I now share a common bond as a generation shaped by the events of September 11th. On that day we saw evil. In the days, weeks, months, and years that followed, despite all of the problems facing us at home and abroad, we have seen a renewed commitment to community and public service. We hold in our hands, all of us, the legacy of over 3,000 people who lost their lives that day. We also hold their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. We have the ability to make the choices that they can no longer make.

Together - we face a choice – do we allow this legacy to falter as a single tragic event, look inward and detach from the world or do we mourn, rebuild, and carry the September 11th legacy of community spirit, public service and caring for others?

That is your choice - make it wisely.

Thank you, good luck and enjoy the day.