

Commencement of the Class of 2015
30 May 2015, Paramount Theatre, Aurora, Illinois
“Acceptance of the Class of 2015”
Dr. Jose M. Torres, President
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Thank you, Mr. Lawrence. It is a privilege to be here with you this morning. IMSA Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, parents, family members, IMSA Fund Board Members, significant others, and—the Class of 2015! Welcome to all! It is a pleasure and an honor to accept you, the Class of 2015. Congratulations to the Seniors, who today become IMSA alumni!

Before I formally accept the Class and they are presented with their diplomas and medallions, I'd like to share a story. Members of the audience, you may eavesdrop as I speak to the graduates. Class of 2015, this is a story of 3 amputees, 1 good leg and 19,340 feet.

“The three American veterans from three wars had only one good leg among them, but that didn't stop them from climbing to the summit of Africa's highest mountain.” Thus, begins an article in *USA Today*, “3 amputees, 1 good leg, 19,340 feet” (Straziuso). This is a story of struggle, of comradeship and of overcoming obstacles. Neal Duncan, 26, veteran of Afghanistan; Kirk Bauer, 62, Vietnam vet (the only one with a good leg); Dan Nevins, 37, a veteran of The Iraq War—these veterans hiked up, slipped, fell down and got up, clawed, scrambled, and finally stood tall six days later on top of Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro at a height of 19,340 feet. And they did all of this with five prosthetic legs made of titanium and carbon fiber and one good leg between the three of them.

Now, why am I telling you this story? None of you has a prosthetic leg. None of you are veterans of wars, yet. I tell you this story because it relates to risk taking—something that I have been speaking to you about. I tell you this story because it has to do with camaraderie. I tell you this story because it has to do with innovation and advancing the human condition.

You see, prosthetic limbs have a long history of innovation dating back to at least the Ancient world. Scientists dated a wooden prosthetic toe found in a mummified remain in Cairo to somewhere around the year 950BC. Through much trial and error, teams of scientists, designers, engineers, etc. have tried and failed, tried and succeeded, and have never given up in their quest to create effective biological–technological interfaces.

Today, the Biomechatronics Group within the MIT Media Lab seeks to advance the science of biomechanics and biological movement control (Biomechatronics). Their mission is twofold: (1) they seek to restore function to individuals who have impaired mobility due to trauma or disease through research and development; and (2) they develop technologies that augment human performance beyond what nature intends.

And so, I relate this story of three amputees, one good leg, 19,340 feet because I want to connect my messages over this school year to you, the Class of 2015. At Convocation in August I spoke to you about stories and service. Two months ago at Pearson Hall, after Mr. Lawrence spoke to you about “being smart and not doing foolish things that could get you excluded from today,” I spoke to you about the importance of choosing your attitude and taking control of your own destiny. You've heard me quote Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's one way” (Frankl, 2006, p. 86).

Then last week during Senior Recognition, I shared with you how important risk and failure are and that perhaps IMSA ought to have an award for the senior who has risked and failed the most amongst his/her classmates. Let's not just recognize those who achieved greatness while at IMSA, which we should continue to do, but let's also recognize those among you who took the greatest risks in learning new things, trying new ventures, and displaying a growth mindset. Over the past few days, some of us discussed giving a giant screw (for the biggest screw up) or a golden egg to recognize what Vinesh said would be "MVF," "Most Valuable Failure."

Last night at Senior Banquet, Vinesh shared a framework and trophy for IMSA to consider. I even had a sophomore come up to me and meekishly say to me, "Dr. Torres, I might be a good candidate for the "Biggest Failure Award."

I replied, "Keep trying, grasshopper, don't give up yet."

Finally, last night, I spoke to you about the importance of time measured by minutes and friendships, which brings me back to the story of three amputees, one good leg, 19,340 feet—a story that captures and connects the dots found in my messages to the class of 2015: risk all, fail fast and often, commit your all to the cause of "advancing the human condition," climb the mountain with your friends and when all seems impossible, prove everyone wrong by doing it!

Let me conclude my remarks this morning with a quote from Countee Cullen, a poet of the Harlem Renaissance who graduated from NYU, then Harvard University. He said, "For we must be one thing or the other, an asset or a liability, the sinew in your wing to help you soar, or the chain to bind you to earth" (Countee Cullen).

Class of 2015, I ask: Will you be an asset or a liability? Class of 2015, will you give back and pay it forward? Class of 2015, will you invest in this world? Will you advance the human condition? Will you create opportunities for others? Will you make a positive impact? Will you help people and our planet? By saying yes, by saying "we will"—you will soar!

Ladies and gentlemen, I present you the Class of 2015—the Class that will continue to soar! Thank you.

And now, it brings me great pleasure and it is my great honor to accept the Class of 2015. By the authority vested in me as President of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy and on behalf of the Board of Trustees and the State of Illinois, I accept these students as graduates of IMSA and proclaim them as worthy to receive their Diplomas and Medallions.

References

Biomechatronics | MIT Media Lab. (n.d.). Retrieved May 2015, from <http://biomech.media.mit.edu/#/>

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Straziuso, J. (2010, August 11). 3 war vets, 1 good leg: Amputees climb Kilimanjaro. *AP Worldstream*. Retrieved May 2015, from <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1A1-D9HHBI7O1.html?>