

Administrator of Year 1995

Lea Dunn

Thank you very much. This is just beautiful! This is lovely. You'll have to excuse me. Let me get my bearings. I'm really overwhelmed by everything tonight that I've heard, observed and experienced. It truly has been a delight for me to be here and for my husband Jeff to be here as well. It is such an honor to be recognized by anybody and to publicly be acclaimed for the things you've done, but I always think it is a true tribute when your peers and people in your profession recognize you. And I truly do hold this honor and am deeply gratified and want to express my thanks to you because it truly is an honor. I consider Al Hanes and Ed Thatcher and Chris to be really fine individuals, and I've worked with them in a number of different capacities. It truly is an honor to have been recognized and nominated and to have received this award.

I've had a delightful day. I've been enjoying your beautiful campus and visiting this wonderful area. This is the first time for us to be in this part of the country, so we've had lots of fun. I've been touring the campus and have talked with faculty today and I can tell you much of what you are learning and you will be bringing with you to your new job will certainly serve you well in the future.

I was talking to Dale about my remarks because I wanted to find out what would be of interest to the students and what you would like to hear about. And I was telling him that I was thinking about reflecting upon my service in public management, or as I told some of the faculty today talk about my agony and ecstasy of public service, because in the last few weeks I've certainly experiences every emotion that you can in public service. I have most recently resigned from the city of Bellaire as city manager where I served for five years and was in the organization for twelve. I've had some time in the last several weeks to reflect upon my public service.

For those of you who are about to graduate, let me congratulate you and all of the award winners let me congratulate you. For the first year students who are about to go into your internships, I want to tell you how I think it's going to be a wonderful experience and I'm thrilled and happy for you. All of you are about to embark upon of the most exciting, thrilling adventures of a lifetime. I'm here to tell you, having been in public management for the last 18 years, I think it is absolutely one of the most noble, honorable professions and we certainly need good folks in this profession, and people who are committed and dedicated to serving the public.

Public service is definitely a noble profession. You are truly the stewards of public trust. Your job is to make the world a better place. That is an awesome responsibility and a high degree of accountability. Your mission as you enter into this service, and it is a thrilling time for you and I hope you feel that, you will look at full avenues because you will be serving not only those people who are looking at economic gain, and developing a new shopping center and so on, but you will also be dealing with people who are looking for better housing, better jobs, better medical care and so on. So you're going to be dealing with a whole host of individuals and a whole range of tasks. There will be many people along the way in which you will learn from.

It is a daunting task before you and it's critical that as you enter this task that you have the skills that will be needed to take you forward in it. You certainly have learned those technical skills. I've seen the program today and I'm very impressed with it. And having worked with Chris Brady for several years, I can tell you you have been well served by this program and it will do you well as you go forward. But other skills that you need as you enter into this program is tolerance, energy, enthusiasm, and a deep sense of fairness and ethics. I think now more than ever that we need individuals with those kind of qualities of leadership and skills.

In my capacity as president of TCMA, I have the opportunity to talk with a lot of different managers throughout the state as well as throughout the U.S., and one of the things that is missing is the lack of leadership both internally and externally. We need good leaders and people who are willing to give of their time and energy. For those of you who are moving into the public service arena, I congratulate you and applaud you. For those of you who are still not sure where you're going to end up being, if you ultimately don't take the public service route, I would encourage you to at least volunteer in your community and involved either in a board or commission or something of that sort because we need good leaders.

Some of the things I thought would be helpful to share with you a little bit some of my reflections on my service in public administration and some of the things I've found helpful along the way. As I said, you have a good basis. You've learned some good technical skills. But one of the things I think is important to remember as you enter into your service is that you never arrive. It is a continual process of growth and renewal. You will have many teachers along the way and I would encourage you to take those teachers and learn from them. They will come in many different guises and many different forms. One of my favorite quotes is an old African quote that says basically "It takes a village to raise a child." It will take many teachers along the way to give you the skills that you will be needing to be a successful professional manager. They'll come from the garbage collector, whom I learned quite a bit from, the citizens, your interns, your employees, and your council, and I would encourage you to take them and use those experiences wisely.

One of your best teachers of experience will be that of failure. Some of the best lessons you will learn along the way is when you do something and you fail at it. Instead of looking at it as a negative experience, I would encourage you to embrace that and use it as an opportunity to learn what you did that didn't quite make it work, what didn't go right and to take that information, because from that you will become a stronger, better manager as a result from that.

I also would encourage along the way to celebrate some of your successes. Some of the things that we don't do too often in the profession, I think, is to celebrate success. Sometimes in public service, change is very slow and it's very difficult sometimes to see how far you've come because the goal seems so far out. I would encourage you to step back every once in a while and to look at how far you've come and celebrate those successes—whether it's a small goal, personal goal, whether it's your organizational goal, or as a department.

The second tenet that I found helpful throughout the years—and it's a very obvious one, but for some reason we tend to forget it sometimes when we get in the throes of public service—and that is simply to treat others as you would like to be treated. You need to respect individuals'

years of experience, knowledge, and their position. I have yet to meet an employee that likes to be publicly ridiculed or dealt with in a negative fashion in public. But there will be times when you find that that will happen and I would encourage you to always remember to treat people as you would like to be treated, knowing full well that you respect yourself and your knowledge.

There are people who bring unique strengths and characteristics to every organization and it's by pulling those strengths and characteristics together and melding them into the common good that will make for a strong organization. One of the things that is helpful in doing that, I don't think we do enough of, as public administrators you will find you will be very good at communicating, at articulating and laying out programs and trying to explain what's going on. One of the things that I think that's been lost, and I would encourage you along the way to cultivate again, is your listening skills. There needs to be more listening to what's being said out there. What's most important is not perhaps what the individual is saying, but what is not being said. Learn to cultivate and hear what's not being said, because often time that will give you the key and be the most important thing in helping you work through issues and problems.

Also, don't be afraid to ask questions or say you don't know. Sometimes when you get in the public arena, you're an MPA graduate, you're supposed to know everything, and certainly when you become city manager you become all-knowledgeable—that's what everybody thinks. I can assure you that when you became city manager you realize how much you don't know and the longer you're in the business you realize that there is so much more out there to learn each day. Don't be afraid to ask questions, and don't be afraid to say "I don't know." Some of the most successful managers and best managers I've ever worked with are people who've simply said "I don't know, but I'll find out." And some of the best projects come about when people say, "Let's talk about it. I'm not sure where we are going. Can we talk together and decide what we want to do?"

This is a profession, as you're getting into it, that's going to take great courage and a tremendous amount of moral fortitude and a tough hide. Fortunately, you will learn and you will go and you'll have opportunities to toughen that hide as you go along. Unfortunately in today's society, I truly think there tends to be a mean-spiritedness and a willingness of people to believe things about government employees without necessarily knowing all the facts. People make decisions based on half-truths and half-innuendos. It's difficult at times because you cannot respond to everything and it's not appropriate that you do. The very nature of public management and some of the laws that govern our profession preclude us from talking about some things. I would encourage you to always stand the high ground and to have great courage. As I've often remarked, we are certainly lucky to be living in the environment we're living in. You do not lose your head, as you did in the 15th century, if you disagree. Certainly you will find that many of those most challenging times and events will be the times that you learn the most and that you forge your character and that will help you in the years to come.

The other thing I think you need to do along the way or I've found helpful, is you need to learn and cultivate the value of looking at reality from many different vantage points. What often happens, particularly as you move on down the road and you get more successful and better at

dealing with issues and problems, is that sometimes managers get tunnel vision, and you begin to think you certainly know how this issue is and how you should address it and this is the way it should be. That's when you really need to stop real quick, because if you don't life will hit you in the face. Because there are many different points of view to an issue. We live in a very different and diverse society, and I would encourage you, when you feel like you have the exact answer, that's the time you need to stop and regroup and look back and try to look at the issue from many different viewpoints. The other thing you need to do as you're looking at that is realize that in every organization there are individuals who are not happy in their life and who like to spread hate and discontent. It's very difficult sometimes when you are in the throes of a difficult issue not to get down to their level, but I would encourage you always to take the high road and to be very professional in dealing with people in this nature. The minute you stoop to their level, you've lost. And you will not be an effective administrator.

The other issue, and what is most important perhaps of all these tenets, is that you need to learn to balance your life. Public management and public service is the most thrilling, exciting service that I think an individual could go into. It also can be all-consuming. It takes a great deal of time, there's usually not much time to deal with your issues, but it's very important that you balance your family and your work life. It's important that you share with you spouse what's going on. Sometimes public service can be very hard on a family, and its important particularly when you're going through some of the tough times and the tough issues that you share with your spouse what's happening, so that when they are at the supermarket or at church or whatever and someone starts talking to them that they know what's happening.

I think it's always important to also maintain your sense of humor. Humor will often carry you through when nothing else does and you certainly shouldn't take yourself so seriously. Sometimes as managers you get very managerial and you often times forget what you're all about and its important not to take yourself so seriously and to realize the humor in every situation—because there always is some.

I think it's important anytime you go through any life and any career, whatever you're in, that you always take the time to reflect and ask yourself three questions. Basically, those three questions are: Are you enjoying what you are doing? Are you happy with where you're going? And finally, are you satisfied with what you are becoming? In public management there are going to be times when you can't always answer yes to those questions. When you can, it's important that you take note and regroup and find out why. More than not, I think that the times that you can answer yes and you can say positively yes, you'll be effective and do a good job as a professional administrator.

As I said, public service I think is truly among the noblest of professions. Through your efforts, you will realize great joy and you will realize great endeavors. There is nothing more thrilling than seeing an employee develop and take hold and take a program that they were once afraid to deal with and move forward with it and expand it and enhance it. Or to see a brand new sewer line, believe me I know that's hard to get excited about, but when you had a cave-in it's really exciting after a while, but to see a city that has had problems and to rebuild their infrastructure and as a result they can now realize economic growth that they couldn't realize before. All of these are thrilling and exciting times and you certainly will enjoy it thoroughly.

There is a reading that I like very much and particularly after I've had children it hits home with me more and more about really the things that you learn as a child and how applicable they are as we grow up. At times, I think all of us would do well to go back to kindergarten and repeat some things there that I think we didn't learn. It's a reading by Robert Fulghum and it's, "All I Ever Knew I Learned In Kindergarten." I'd like to close with that and share it with you.

It says:

"All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile. . . These are the things I learned:

Share everything

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life—learn some and think some. . .

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands and stick together.

Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

And remember the Dick-and-Dane books and the first word you learned—the biggest word of all—LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

Take any of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family or your work or your government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm."

I want to congratulate the graduating class. I want to congratulate the first-year students for completing the first-year course load and also all the recipients for the honors tonight. You

truly are embarking upon a wondrous adventure and I would encourage you to embrace it, enjoy it, and learn from it, because it will be a thrill that you will never forget. As you will enjoy every minute of it. Thank you for allowing me to be here this evening and share with you some of my thoughts.

Lea will entertain any questions you may have or she'll stay here after if you want to talk to her personally. More individually.

I want to tell one story that probably the first-year students and maybe many of the spouses and even some of the faculty didn't know. Last year at this banquet that was here we had one of our students that wasn't here last year, a first-year student, and that's Reese DeMille. Reese's mother, if I remember right, had died of cancer a few years or months before, and Reese's dad was diagnosed with having cancer/ It was kind of a tough time for Reese. I remember that. And he wanted to go home to be with his dad. They thought his dad was going to die. So a group of the first-year students got together and raised the money so that Reese could fly home to Seattle to be with his dad, and that kind of explains the poem. It taught me a lot at that time about kind of some basic human goodness that we, as a faculty, try to live by and that we hope you students will learn and try to live by also.

When I talked to Lea Dunn today, she kind of glossed over this rather emotional, traumatic experience and I had some insight into it because I had talked with Chris Brady several times during these last few weeks. But she made the comment that one of the things she learned from the experience is how important family is to her. Her immediate family, her husband and her two sons and her extended family and her husband's family, and how much support they give to her during this time. She had relatives call her almost every day just to see how she was doing. It's a thing we need to kind of remember as we go through our life. It is a thing we need to learn.

I was reading Ann Landers, I'm not an Ann Landers reader, and I'm not necessarily a fan, I don't think she gives very good advice, but I like to read the problems that are posed to her, and there was a problem of a widow, a recently widowed woman, who said that she was really discouraged because no one called her to dinner to go out with them and she was lonely and things like that. That apparently came in to Ann Landers some time ago, but there was a response to that question and it said, wondered if the woman, before she was widowed, had ever thought about other widows and invited them to come out with her.

I hope we can all learn to be kind to play together well in the sandpile. And that's probably the most important thing we can learn here. I've never heard of any student that has ever been laid off because they weren't technically competent that's come out of this program. We've had several students that have been laid off, but non because they weren't technically competent. We had some students just because they weren't nice that lost their jobs. So be nice, be kind, and some of you that are graduating—maybe we'll see you again, maybe we won't. Maybe we'll see you in the next life. First-year students, we'll see you again. You hope!