

N. Dale Wright Distinguished Alumnus Speech

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This is a great honor and pleasure. I'm very, very humbled to be here with you this evening. When Vicki reached out to me, I was absolutely shocked. I went home and told Beth, I said, "The MPA program selected me as Alumni of the Year." She started laughing.

It is an amazing honor to be here. But I got to tell you: When Dr. Wheeler came in the door, I had this very visceral reaction. For about 30 years, I have had this recurring dream. And every time I share this dream with anybody, they say, "Oh, my gosh, I have the same dream." The dream is that it is the last semester. I am expecting to graduate, only to find out that there is a project that I have not yet turned in. When I saw Dr. Wheeler, I thought, *Oh my gosh, that dream is coming true. She's coming in to tell me that I have not finished my project for qualitative analysis. And I'm not going to graduate.* And then I looked around and I was thinking *Vicki, surely you have the project somewhere in the locker right?*

What a pleasure it was to be brought up as a public sector servant in this MPA program at Brigham Young University. Dr. Wheeler and Dr. Wright are here with us this evening, and they are individuals who had a great impact on me at a very important time in my life. I am grateful for them.

I'm also grateful for Rob and his leadership of the program at this point in time. I had the opportunity to spend some time with the faculty at lunch yesterday, which was great. I'm grateful for Vicki and Karee, and the work they put in to making tonight happen. I also had the opportunity yesterday to meet our Dean of the Marriott School of Management, Dean Madrian. I found out that she and I were in the same Econ 380 class in 1988. I was sitting there thinking, *Why did I not choose her as a study partner?* I might have gotten better than a 39 on the midterm.

She shared with me the vision of the Marriott School of Business. I was so impressed with it that I literally changed my whole talk for tonight to incorporate it. It's just such a powerful document, so crisp, and on point. I think it speaks to the heart of what we're about here at BYU, the Marriott school, and the Romney Institute of Public Management. What I want to do is spend a few minutes with you this evening, walk through that vision, and then share with you some of the experiences I had over the course of my career with some really phenomenal people. They did not come through BYU, but they totally exemplify the principles that we espouse here at the Marriott school.

### **Vision**

Our vision is, "We aspire to transform the world, through Christ-like leadership." What a profound statement: "Transform the world." We as MPA folks are agents of accomplishing this vision, including the faculty here and the students. We accomplish it by two means and that is community and governance.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we have a unique and fundamental understanding of the importance of community. "And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them." You all in this

room are uniquely qualified and positioned to create and teach people how to create harmony and unity and transform communities.

What do we believe about governance? In Doctrine and Covenants 134:1, we espouse that, "We believe that governments [are] instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he holds men [and women] accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them, for the good and safety of society." We live in a society and a culture that likes to make fun of its government; it's just kind of what we do as Americans. I know that's okay. There needs to be some humor in all these things. Certainly, all levels of government have their flaws and need improvement. But we, as Latter-Day Saints, recognize that government is instituted by God. You read the Book of Mormon, and you just see this amazing pattern that when the people are good and righteous, their governance is good and righteous and strong.

The reality is government is us. For those of us who choose government as our profession and those of you who are training future government leaders, it really is us. The laws and the policies are passed by the people we work with. So, our mission is to develop leaders of faith, intellect, and character.

## **Values**

### Faith in Christ

Our values [begin with] faith in Christ. "We value deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ. Our faith gives us the capacity to envision a better future, the confidence to make that future happen, and the courage to act in the face of challenges."

As Rob mentioned in my bio, I had the opportunity to work with some amazing people when I was with the City of Hickory, Mike Bennett being one of them. We were able to put together a bond package that the voters approved. They chose to increase their own property taxes to invest in things that they thought would help the community.

In the process of doing that, there were two business leaders whom I had the privilege to work with, who really exemplified this faith. Jeff Cline ran a local insurance company that was super well-known in the community and was a real mover and shaker. I'll never forget being in the "mover and shaker" civic club, making a presentation, telling the group what the city was wanting to do. Jeff was sitting in the front row as I was doing my PowerPoint like this: [crosses arms]. And I was like, *Oh my gosh, if Jeff Cline doesn't get on board with this, we're going nowhere*. Fortunately, as I went through the presentation, I watched his body language. I watched him open up, and I watched him think through what we were talking about. Then I actually saw him start nodding his head. Jeff stepped forward and ran that campaign as a private citizen to make sure that those bonds passed.

He was matched by a gentleman named Paul Thompson, who had grown a local company, one of the few companies located in downtown Hickory. Paul was thinking about moving his fledgling technology company to Charlotte because he was concerned that he couldn't attract the talent he needed to Hickory. [When] we went to Paul and explained to him the investments that we thought the city was going to be able to make, Paul bought into that vision. Paul put his personal money into rehabbing an old mill building and turning it into his corporate headquarters, which would be on one of the main city walks the city was going to build. Maybe not coincidentally, both of those men are disciples of Jesus Christ. Both of those men are men of deep faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

### Integrity in Action

"We value integrity and hold ourselves to the highest moral and ethical standards. Acting with integrity builds trust, strengthens character, and focuses our ambition on things of eternal consequence."

When I had the opportunity to work for the city of Hickory, the most amazing thing happened. We had two sanitation employees who were great guys. I had some opportunity to actually get to know them on an individual basis. One day, I'm in my office, and I get a phone call from the public works director, and he says, "You're not going to believe this." Now when your public works director starts a phone call like that, you have a moment of *Oh, no*.

Todd and Edwin were running their route collecting trash that Tuesday. They were out on their business, going and picking up the trash cans. This one house had a big pile of boxes and other trash. As they're putting that in the back [of the dump truck], one of the boxes dumped out and there was clothing in it. Out of a suit coat, fell a wad of \$100 bills about that big [gestures].

Without even a thought, Todd, who was the one at the back of the truck and could have put it in his pocket and no one would have ever known, picked it up off the street when it fell out. And he said, "Edwin, you're not going to believe what I just found." So, Edwin comes around. And the two of them now have an opportunity, right? "You take half, I take half."

They never even hesitated. They walked immediately up to the house and rang the doorbell. Nobody was home. So, they drove around with \$15,000 in their truck for the rest of their shift, went back to that house at the end of the shift, went up and knocked on the door and a lady opened the door. They say, "Ma'am, we think you inadvertently threw something away this morning that you didn't mean to." They showed her this wad of cash, and all the blood just drained out of her face.

She says, "Oh my gosh, that is the bonuses for my husband's employees. That idiot keeps wads of cash in these jackets in our closet. and I went through and was throwing all that stuff away. And I threw away the bonuses for our employees."

I mean, can you imagine a situation of greater integrity from those two men? Those are the type of people that I have been blessed to work with in local government.

### Respect for All

We respect all people. "We value respect for all individuals as children of God and recognize the inherent worth, divine potential, and agency of each person. A climate of respect and belonging enhances our learning, facilitates collaboration, and encourages personal growth."

In 2009, our city was going through a lot of financial challenges. I was cutting the budget pretty dramatically a couple of years in a row. The city had four swimming pools that, as my assistant city manager said, looked like Soviet Union-era pools. We did not maintain them, and they were falling apart. It was going to cost about \$3 million apiece to fix them, and they had very few people attending. And they were not attractive. So, we were methodically closing those down.

One of them was in a historically minority neighborhood of Hickory. I'm still a relatively new city manager and trying to figure out how to navigate some of those situations. In that community, every month they would have what was called a "family meeting", where the community would

gather. The leaders in the African American community would come together, and they would talk about issues in the community. They would invite the school superintendent, police chief and different leaders in the community. So I thought, *Well, this is a good opportunity for me to go and share with them what we're going to have to do in their community and close this pool down.* That was pretty naive. I thought, *All I got to do is show them what it costs and how many people come in with cost per person and then they'll all go, "You're a smart city manager, glad we have you."*

It did not turn out like that. Thirty minutes in, literally about 40 of them—they are the sweetest, most of them older ladies, some older men—were just full-on attacking me, and I did not expect that. I was just kind of looking around like, *holy cow, how am I going to get out of this?*

A man that I had not yet met, named Reverend David Roberts, a large African American man and a very respected minister in the community, stood up about 20 minutes into my being skewered. He held his hands up and said, "Y'all need to quit this. This man came here to talk to you all, and you all are treating him terribly."

It was a rare time for me, being a minority in that situation. Many of you have served missions and been a minority, so you understand what that feels like. I was feeling very much a sense of, *I'm on the losing end of this, and I'm all by myself.* David stood up and told them, "Look, you may not like what Mr. Berry is telling you. But he came here to tell you these things. And we're going to work with him to figure things out." Then he said, "Y'all stand up, join hands, we are going to say a prayer, and we're done." David became a great friend of mine.

Fast forward a few years: We had an officer-involved shooting of an African American male in our community, right on the heels of many other shootings, and the riots in Charlotte, just 50 miles down the road. When I got the call from our Sheriff's Department telling me that the shooting had happened and that there was a death, I immediately picked up the phone. David was on my speed dial. I called him up and I said, "David!"

He said, "Yeah, I know."

I said, "What are we going to do? What do you need?" With his leadership and other great leaders in the African American community, the city of Hickory and Catawba County were able to navigate one of the greatest crises we have ever faced in really an amazing fashion. You all didn't read about it, right? The media doesn't cover it when a community comes together and mourns and figures out how to move forward without throwing stones at each other. It was because of the respect for all, and this sense of inclusivity that was coming from my African American friends, who were willing to reach out to all of us to make sure that we did this the right way as a community. It brought me to tears when David offered the invocation at my retirement reception a few months ago, thinking of all that he had done for me in my career. He is just a great, great man.

### Excellence

"We value excellence in learning, teaching, research, management, and leadership. An expectation of excellence magnifies our influence and motivates us to continually improve."

I had the great privilege of serving with a police chief named Tom Adkins. I can't put my finger on one single thing, but he just had this ability to inspire people to rise to a level of excellence. I was very blessed to work with him. He was one of those guys that when I didn't know what I

was doing, or if something was really tricky, I'd pick up the phone and call him and say, "Chief, you got 30 minutes? I need to come over to your office and man, we need to talk some stuff out."

We had a horrible crime take place in our community. A precious little girl was murdered by her stepmother and her body was dismembered. You can imagine the strain that puts on the Chief of Police. The entire community is looking at that man as if somehow, it's his fault. Somehow, it's his responsibility. The entire community is questioning its identity, "Is this who we are, this cannot happen in Hickory. Chief Adkins, how did you let that happen?" This was a situation where CNN and Fox and everybody was on his doorstep every day, wanting to know what was happening. It was absolutely amazing to watch him in that situation, exhibiting excellence in leadership, and to watch his officers investigate that situation and ultimately solve it, and bring the whole situation to a conclusion, to justice, to begin the healing we all needed.

What I hoped to share with you in these few minutes was an admiration for the vision and mission that we have here at the Marriott School of Business and Romney Institute of Public Management. To share with you the incredible people that I've been blessed to work with, and hopefully inspire—I got to always make the plug to the MPA students—inspire some of our students to consider local government management, the great career that it is. I'm thankful again, for the faculty. I'm thankful for the friends that I was blessed to go through the program with from 1988 to 1990.

I am thankful for the awesome colleagues I was able to work with, the city and county staff and the committed elected officials. And first and foremost I am grateful for my family and my wife. When you have these kinds of roles in local government, there's a lot of stress and pressure and you tend to give your best to those people that you work with. Sometimes when you get home, you don't have any best left to give to anybody. I'm deeply grateful to my family and especially to Beth for putting up with me and sustaining me and pumping me up and sharing the burden. She gave me many good ideas and would tell me when I was doing great and she would tell me when I had some really stupid ideas. She has been a true trusted and beloved partner in our career and in life.

Again, thank you for this incredible honor. I'm so humbled by this opportunity. Thank you.