Life Stories I’ve Learned: Centre College Commencement
May 22, 2011
by Lee T. Todd Jr., President, University of Kentucky

President Rousch, Centre College Board of Trustees, members of the Platform Party, faculty and staff, friends and family, and most especially, the graduating Class of 2011:

I’m extremely grateful for the honor you have bestowed upon me today. As a university president, I know the significance and distinction of awarding the honorary doctorate. My gratitude is magnified by the great respect I have for your President and for this institution. Centre College is considered a gem in the crown of higher education not only in Kentucky but also in the Nation. To be added to the list of prior honorary doctorates that this institution has awarded is truly humbling and I thank you very much for this designation.

My remarks will not, and should not, be the highlight of your day. I’m told that most college graduates cannot even recall the name of their commencement speaker! My name is Lee Todd – L-E-E T-O-D-D!

I want to share with you four life stories that I was not aware of when I graduated from college but that I have learned through my experiences since then. I grew up in a small Western Kentucky coal mining town, Earlington, with a population of 2,000. Patsy and I started the first grade together. I was the first member of my family to go to college. I had a lot to learn both in the classroom and in the “real world”.
The first story I’d entitle, “Choose Challenge over Comfort”. When I graduated from high school, I attended Murray State University. After I was at Murray for two years, I was quite comfortable. I had done much better academically than I had expected. I knew the professors and the professors knew me. I had made a lot of friends and I really liked the campus. Everything was very comfortable . . . but, I wanted to be an engineer and to do so I had to transfer to U.K., which was kind of scary to me at the time. So I transferred. I was intimidated. The lowest score I ever made on a test in my life was the first test I took at UK, since I had put myself under such pressure.

I eventually righted my rudder and did much better there than I had expected. By my senior year I was again quite comfortable. I knew the professors and they knew me. I had made a lot of friends and I really liked the campus. But then I got an extraordinary opportunity to leave that comfort and go to Boston, to M.I.T. For whatever reason, I chose challenge over comfort. Patsy and I, recently married, loaded our worldly possessions into a small U-Haul trailer and headed to Boston to ‘grow up’.

If I had been intimidated by the transition from Murray to UK, I was scared to death when I went from UK to MIT. I had the feeling that everyone else was a genius and that I was the only one that really had to study. But, I gained tremendously from that experience. I had to reprove myself to a set of new professors who didn’t know me from Adam. I had to reprove myself to myself.

These transitions were life changing. So when something inside you is trying to get your attention, when something inside you is telling you it is time for change, listen to that still small voice - - and consider “CHOOSING CHALLENGE OVER COMFORT.”

The second life story is, “Take some risks”. When I was in graduate school at MIT, I received six US patents in the area of large-screen, projection displays. When I returned to Kentucky to
join the engineering faculty at UK, I had decided to license my patents to a company in Boston and to consult with them to develop products based on the patents while I remained a faculty member at UK and receive royalty checks. However, in 1982, during a major recession, the Boston company went into bankruptcy. I received a call from their vice president asking me to help them sell their projection picture tube production equipment to RCA, GE or Raytheon. I told him that I’d have to think about it. I walked across the street to Arby’s near UK’s campus and had one of those lunches where you talk to yourself. It was as if the Lord came to me and said, “This is your chance but you’re going to have to stick your neck out and take a big risk”. I called the VP back and told him that, if the price was low enough, I’d purchase the equipment, move it to Kentucky and start a company. I would make their special picture tube to help them stay in business – and to protect my dream. In three weeks, I was moving 60 tons of equipment to Kentucky in seven United Van Lines trucks and started my first company. Interest rates were 22 percent! Patsy and I were expecting our second child, Kathryn, and I’d never made a picture tube in my life! Soon thereafter, I left the UK faculty thus giving up my secure tenured position. I took several risks in the direction of my passion and these risks made it possible for me to develop two companies here in Kentucky, Projectron and DataBeam, and to create several jobs for bright, young people like you.

I’ve always encouraged students to consider adding some risk taking to their decision process. When I returned to UK to teach, my students would ask me, “What are some differences between UK and MIT”? I told them, “If you walk through the student lounge on Monday morning, they are not talking about basketball! Also, they did not come to MIT expecting to work for someone else all their lives.” I told them further, “You want to go to college to get a job. You need to consider going to college to create a job!” That approach does require taking some risks. So, I urge you to take
risks in the direction of your passion. It can lead to very rewarding achievements.

My third life story is, “Strive for a Higher Purpose”. Those who go through life focused primarily on making money are not the ones I enjoy spending time with. However, I love those who want to make a difference. Dr. Todd Hastings, a 1996 Centre graduate, who went on to MIT to receive his PhD, faced a decision once he completed his doctorate. He could have gone into industry about anywhere in America but he chose to come back to his home state and join the UK engineering faculty in order to help UK seek its Top 20 Challenge and to help change the state of Kentucky. He is now a tenured Associate Professor, is an outstanding teacher and researcher, has several patents and has formed a company. He gives a lot of credit to his mentor here at Centre, Professor Marshall Wilt. I have had the chance to recruit other outstanding individuals to join us at UK. In several cases, these individuals are considering going to institutions such as Harvard, Berkley or Cleveland Clinic. I have appealed to them by saying, “You could go to Harvard, Berkley or Cleveland Clinic and ten years from now, they'll still be Harvard, Berkley and Cleveland Clinic. However, if you come to UK now, you'll be able to look back in ten years and say, “I helped make a real difference.” I have found that many of them want to work for a higher purpose.

The students that helped me start Projectron and DataBeam were some of the best at UK. They could have gone to Microsoft, AT&T or many other high-tech companies. What made them come to work for a company that their parents and grandparents had never heard of? They wanted to work for a higher purpose – to show that Kentuckians can compete in this high-tech world. That it is not just the East and West Coasts that can be innovative and creative. They developed software products that were licensed to Microsoft, Cisco, Intel, Sony and projection picture tubes installed in flight simulators all over the world. So, look for
that higher purpose that will allow you to reap very satisfying rewards.

The fourth and final life story is, “Dream Big”. I recently read The Last Lecture by Carnegie Mellon Professor Randy Pausch who gave his last lecture shortly after he had received a terminal diagnosis due to pancreatic cancer. The title of the lecture was, “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams”. He indicated that when he was a child he dreamed that he would someday work for Walt Disney as an “imagineer”. Fortunately, he was able to complete a project with Walt Disney before he passed. In reading about his childhood dream, it caused me to think about my dreams as a child growing up in rural Kentucky. I realized that when I left high school to attend Murray, I dreamed that I could be a high school math teacher because the person I admired the most was my high school math teacher, Mr. Bill Fulkerson. After attending Murray, I began to dream that I could be a university professor because of my admiration of Professor William Taylor. While I attended UK, I began to dream that I could be a university research professor. When I moved along to MIT, I began to dream that someday I might start a company like Professor Amar Bose of Bose Acoustics. I realized that I dreamed linearly. My dreams enlarged as I became exposed to other professions and opportunities. As a child, I never dreamed big enough. And I certainly never dreamed that I would be President of the University of Kentucky!

You have completed a big dream today by graduating from this outstanding institution. You most likely have dreams of what you next want to achieve. My challenge to you is to raise your vision 15 degrees higher. Dream bigger. I strongly believe that each of you can achieve more that you are presently thinking.

So, in summary:

- Choose Challenge Over Comfort
• Take Some Risks
• Work for a Higher Purpose
• Dream Big
• L-E-E  T-O-D-D

Congratulations on your achievement today. I wish you the very best and will watch your progress with great anticipation.