

Kingsborough Community College
Commencement Address
By Andrew D. Weyman
June 8, 2007

It's a great day in Brooklyn! Thank you, President Peruggi for inviting me to be here today. And thank you students, families, faculty and administration. Thank you to my beautiful wife, Terry, for accompanying me on this adventure. And thank you to the crew of Jet Blue flight 350 for my three bags of jumbo mixed nuts.

I was born and raised in Brooklyn. I attended public schools all my life and I am proud to say that I am a graduate of Kingsborough Community College. Class of 1971. And here I am, thirty-six years later. Speaking to the Class of 2007. How cool is that?!

You're the Class of 2007! Look at you! This is the day for which you've worked long and hard. This is the day you go home with your college degree. It's a day to feel proud of what you've accomplished. It's a day to thank your families for their support and your teachers for their dedication. It's a day when men wear gowns and women wear...gowns.

It's also a day to look ahead to the future. Some of you are feeling full of hopes and dreams. Some of you are feeling full of confusion and fear. Some of you are feeling full of confused hopes and fearful dreams. Some of you don't know what you're feeling. Personally, I'm feeling a little nervous and very, very excited. Because there's something I have a chance to share with you on this great day.

It's a story. It begins in 173 B.C., but I promise I'll be brief. So, there was this guy. He was a Roman writer, named Publius Terentius Afer. His fans called him Terence. He was brought to Rome from northern Africa, to be a slave. Terence was eventually freed and offered an education. He took advantage of the offer and changed the course of Roman comedic history forever. By the way, I've taken a little poetic license with this so some of the facts may or may not be, well, facts.

It was open-mike night at one of those 173 B.C. Roman comedy clubs that sprung up all over town. Actually, since they didn't have mikes back then, I guess it was kind of an "open-shout" night. So, some guy named Titus Maccius Plautus was finishing his set and butchering all his punch lines and mixing up his Greek and Roman. It was awful. He finally decided to wrap it up. The crowd was out of control. Everybody was way beyond their overpriced two goblet minimum. They started throwing tomatoes and cauliflower and yelling about throwing Plautus to the lions. He shouted out something about appearing again next Tuesday and ran off the stage.

The M.C. tried to quiet everyone down and after many attempts, was able to introduce Terence. Terence took the stage and he was a nervous wreck. He looked at the audience

and saw this sea of faces staring at him with great expectation. His heart was pounding in his chest and he had to calm himself down. So, he decided to take a deep breath and use that old theater trick of imagining the audience naked, as I'm doing with all of you, right now.

So, Terence asked who was from out of town and told a pretty funny story about how his girlfriend tried to break up with him but he wouldn't let her. And the crowd started to come around. And then he came up with a killer line. It went something like this – "Essendo humanum, nihil ad me alienum est." And the Romans went crazy! For those of you who know Latin, you're way ahead of me on this. For those of you who don't, let me explain. Oh, that Terence!

Since I promised I'd be brief, I'm going to jump ahead from 173 B.C. to 1969 A.D. Now, I know that's a quantum leap. And I know that there was a lot of stuff that happened in between but I really don't care about any of it because it messes up the flow of my story. And I promise that I'll come back to Terence in a little bit. But for now, it's all about 1969.

In no particular order, in 1969:

We were fighting an unpopular war halfway around the world in Vietnam. A brand new Volkswagen sold for \$1,799. The Woodstock Music Festival was held. There were riots in Pakistan. Sesame Street premiered. John Lennon married Yoko Ono. There was turmoil in Somalia. The Gap opened its first store. The Jets won the Superbowl. The Mets won their first world series. J. Lo, Jay Z., and P.Diddy were born. Richard Nixon became president. Mario Puzo wrote The Godfather. At age twenty-seven, Stephen Hawking proved his black hole theory. A crude version of the internet was made available to the public for the first time. And Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon.

But most importantly, 1969 was the year in which I was accepted to Kingsborough Community College.

I wasn't much of a student at Canarsie High School. I cut classes, got poor grades, and scored below average on my SATs. I was a skinny awkward teenager and had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. My thoughts always seemed to drift away from the writing on the chalkboard. I had the uncanny ability to be able to explain textbook chapters that I never read, in ways my teachers never imagined. My homework assignments reflected my talent for creative excuses like I couldn't do my science project because I had dance rehearsal for my Quincenera. And I didn't have my essay because my father smoked it.

My two years at Kingsborough were transformational because it was at Kingsborough that I learned to focus and understand what was expected of me. It was at Kingsborough that I made new friends. It was at Kingsborough that my attention was grabbed by the

expertise and passion of my professors. It was at Kingsborough that I truly started to discover who I am.

I was blessed with many great professors. There's one in particular I'd like to tell you about today. He taught Shakespeare and was one of several teachers with whom I had the privilege of studying that made a profound difference in my life. His name is Professor Samuel Ceccarelli.

Professor Ceccarelli had all sorts of inventive ways to begin class. Sometimes he'd start out with a quote. Like this one, from Plato. "If there isn't any wood, there can't be any fire." He'd build his lessons upon these attention-getting openers. He started one of his classes about Shakespearean characters by writing something on the board that I remember to this day. They were the words of Terence. "Essendo humanum, nihil ad me alienum est."

Professor Ceccarelli asked if anyone had any idea what the words on the chalkboard meant. I certainly didn't. I mean, they were in Latin. I knew a few dirty words in Italian and entiendo un poquito de Espanol but other than that, I was linguistically lost. And I wasn't the only one in class who didn't understand. Everyone else was just as clueless. So Professor Ceccarelli broke it down with us, word by word. Now, this was thirty-eight years ago so forgive me if I don't remember it exactly. But you know, in a way, that's part of the beauty of it. It doesn't really matter. Because I walked away that day with something that changed my life forever. "Essendo humanum, nihil ad me alienum est."

We discussed many variations and translations. Here's what I remember settling on - "Essendo humanum, nihil ad me alienum est," "I am a human being, so nothing is strange to me." So now that we got past the Latin, what does that mean in English? I mean, I got the human being part but "nothing is strange to me?" What does that mean? Professor Ceccarelli poked and prodded us. He encouraged us and gently guided us to form our conclusion. "I am a human being, so nothing is strange to me."

Nothing is strange to me. Nothing is outside my ability to experience and to accomplish. I am a human being therefore I am capable of the greatest heights of achievement and the worst, unimaginable acts of cruelty and violence. Nothing is strange to me. As a human being, I have it in my power to choose who I want to be and what it is I want to do with my life. I have the choice to achieve great things. I can pursue my dreams and share with the world all that I have to offer. I can give back to my family, and my community and my school. I have the courage to take risks and I won't let fear stand in my way.

When I left the classroom that day, I was changed forever. Professor Ceccarelli taught us about Shakespeare and while doing so, provoked me into realizing that my potential was limited only by what limitations I chose to put on it. I was truly inspired.

I was able to speak with Professor Ceccarelli yesterday, after thirty-seven years. I was delighted, surprised and even shocked that not only did he remember me, but he

recounted conversations we had in class. I was able to thank him and tell him how his passion inspired me in ways I could never have imagined.

Professor Ceccarelli gave me a great gift and I wanted to share it with you. “Essendo humanum, nihil ad me alienum est.” With your degree in hand, everything is possible. Let nothing be strange to you. Experience life to the fullest. Bite off more than you can chew, then chew it. Take risks. Make mistakes. Reflect. Trust your instincts. Find your passion and enjoy the journey.

Now, you may be asking yourself, “Why did the Romans find Terence’s line so funny?” Very simply, they were drunk.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here with you today. Congratulations to the Kingsborough Community College Class of 2007!