

DONNA FERNANDES COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

When I was asked to be the speaker at today's commencement ceremonies, I was immediately flattered. Wow, what an honor. A few weeks later, however, panic set in. What words of wisdom do I have to impart on these bright young graduates. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized what an important group of individuals you really are. You have spent the last few years working very hard to prepare yourselves for careers as teachers, school administrators, counselors, or academics. Each of you undoubtedly has a passion for education and I hope that passion will last.

The statistics out there suggest that for many of you, it will not. Nationally, 11% of all new teachers leave the profession after the first year and 39% within five years. On top of that, only 60% of college students who major in education choose to teach. As a result, we are facing a national shortage of teachers. To curb this growing problem and encourage most of you to stay in the field, I'd like to present my TOP TEN reasons to remain in teaching:

10. Great Health Benefits

I know that starting salaries for teachers may not be the most competitive, especially if you have to pay down all of the student loans you've been accumulating. But the health benefits can be outstanding. In the City of Buffalo, for example, elective plastic surgery is covered in the teachers' union contract.

By my own appearance, it is obvious that cosmetic surgery is not covered by the Buffalo Zoo's health plan. But just imagine how fabulous I could look if it were. Plastic surgery may not be important to you when you're in your twenties but wait until your eyelids, jowls, and just about every other body part starts to sag. Then you'll be grateful. So hang in there.

9. Summers Off

I can still remember the utter joy of the last day of school each year when all of my obligations had been met and laid out before me was two months of uncommitted bliss. No other job offers as much vacation as a career in teaching. You will be able to garden, play golf and tennis, do endless home improvement projects, or sit like a couch potato watching Jerry Springer—whatever your heart desires.

For the industrious types out there, you can supplement your income with a summer job. Note that the Buffalo Zoo is always looking for talented teachers to help with our extensive summer programming. So keep us in mind.

8. Job Security

Sadly, there is and will continue to be a shortage of qualified teachers. It is estimated that the nation will need to hire 2.2 million public school teachers over the next decade. In New York State, one-third of all teachers are at least 50 years of age. As these baby boomers retire, you will be in higher demand than ever. You won't have to worry about downsizing and lucky for you, the job of a teacher can never be outsourced to China, India, or Mexico.

Teachers and academics also have a tenure system that makes it very hard to remove someone arbitrarily. So you won't have to kiss up to your bosses for the rest of your lives just to keep your job.

7. Access to the Latest Trends in Fashion and Music

Being around young people, whether grade school, high school, or college students, definitely keeps you young. You are continuously exposed to the newest styles in clothing, music, and technology. I must admit that I'm a bit of a dinosaur in that respect. I still listen to the same music I did in high school and college—the classics of the 70's and 80's. Recently, I had a rude awakening when I discovered that I was listening to a golden oldies radio station and I knew the words to all the songs.

My sister, on the other hand, is a college professor at an art institute. She's up on the latest fashion trends and is always begging me to update my wardrobe. Now that the 70's are back in style, I needn't worry.

And half the time, I can't even decipher her emails. Last week she signed one, LOL. I thought it stood for Lots of Love—not Laughing Out Loud! Working with young people, you'll never have to worry about ending up like me.

6. You Can Practice on Someone Else's Kids

Being a good parent is an acquired skill. What is the best blend of discipline, positive reinforcement, motivation, and encouragement to produce a psychologically healthy and productive child? Who knows? But you'll likely have a few years practicing your parenting skills on other people's children before you risk messing up your own. Those of you planning to be guidance counselors will undoubtedly get the most out of this particular job benefit.

5. Great Colleagues

Teachers are very special people. They are caring, nurturing, intelligent individuals that are fun to be around. Being in the nonprofit sector myself, I can tell you how wonderful it is to work with people who care about something bigger than themselves and who aren't simply motivated by the size of their paycheck.

4. Lifelong Learning

As a teacher, you have the opportunity and responsibility to instill the love of learning in others. When you open the eyes of a child to all of the knowledge that is out there, you are opening a door that can never be closed. They will no longer believe ignorance is bliss and will be less easily manipulated by others. They can expose themselves to alternative views of a subject and make up their own minds.

As teachers, you will have to remain lifelong learners yourselves. You will need to stay current on the latest ideas or breakthroughs in your discipline. And you will probably be asked to teach a variety of different subjects over the course of your career requiring new preparation and new learning. In fact, it has been said that the true secret of teaching is to appear to have known all your life what you just learned this morning.

3. The Future is in Your Hands

Teaching is the profession that teaches all other professions. Every expert in the world learned what he or she knows from a teacher. You are the ones preparing our young people to fill all of the roles needed in our economy, our community, and our society.

It is a role to be taken very seriously. We are entrusting our collective future to your hands, for no other profession impacts young people more than teaching.

2. The AHA Moments

One of the most gratifying things about teaching is lifting the veil of frustration and self-loathing in a pupil when you come up with a unique way of explaining or demonstrating a complicated concept that finally allows that student to get it. The look of AHA that comes over their face, the moment of pure joy and exhilaration is priceless.

Live for that day in a child's life when you show them that they can learn, they can understand, and they can master anything!

1. They'll Have You to Thank

Jacques Barzan wrote, "In teaching, you cannot see the fruit of a day's work. It is invisible and remains so, maybe for twenty years." For most of your students, you will never know the full impact you had on their lives. The better people they became for having spent a year in your classroom.

But I don't know a single successful person who can't cite by name the teacher who inspired them to follow their particular career path. That is perhaps the greatest gift you as teachers can give to your students. Help them discover their passion.

There is a great career help book entitled *Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow* and it's true. I love my job as director of the Buffalo Zoo. I probably would do it for free, and with last year's county budget crisis, I thought I might have to!

I can tell you that it was my high school biology teacher, Mr. Cone, who ignited my passion for animals and animal behavior. I had the good fortune of running into him several years later when I was going for my Ph.D. in animal behavior and I could thank him for changing my life.

Each of you can and will be in an instrument of change for your students. Relish this opportunity.

So when you find yourself exhausted and frustrated because of the low pay, large class sizes, kids out of control, or dysfunctional and disinterested parents, remember why you became a teacher in the first place and recall my top ten reasons to remain one.

Good luck and congratulations to all of you. Now go out there and make us proud!