

It's such a pleasure to be addressing the Embry-Riddle Prescott graduating class of 2017. President Butler, Dr. Ayers, fellow members of the Board of Visitors, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, and of course, the Class of 2017, thank you for having me here today.

When Dr. Ayers invited me to be this year's commencement speaker, I didn't hesitate to accept because I try to take advantage of every opportunity to come back to Prescott.

I grew up on a cattle ranch in Montana, and every time I go back there, no matter where I've been and for how long I've been away, it's always home. I feel that same way coming here. It just feels like the right place.

My first memory of Embry-Riddle goes back to April of 1997 when I came here for admitted student preview day. I was looking for a place that was going to prepare me to become a commercial airline pilot. I was coming from a small rural high school in Montana – 15 kids in my graduating class – and I was here all by myself, scoping out my future.

I still have trouble pinpointing exactly what the feeling was after my first day, and it may be slightly different for each of us, but the word I keep coming back to is "belonging." I just felt like I instantly *belonged* here.

It's one of those memories that formed the bedrock of my years here at Embry-Riddle, something so indelible that I still feel it every time I return to Prescott.

Now, I knew Embry Riddle wasn't going to give me the typical, big college experience. Let's be honest, we don't generally say that we came here for the sports (at least not when I was a student here)...but, I realized that I didn't *want* that typical, big college experience. I wanted this. I wanted to be part of *this* small, tight knit community. I was going to be leaving my home and family in Montana, and I couldn't imagine a better place to build a *new* home and family, with people who shared the same purpose and passion.

I felt instantly part of the fabric here. My roommate, Jeni Borge, a hippie from Oregon, who was paired randomly with this naïve, small town ranch girl from Montana, became my best friend and we lived together the entire time we were here. Her parents, Steve and Cheri, became a second family to me. They're here today. The Borge family loved this place so much that Steve and Cheri moved here, and Jeni is the Embry-Riddle admissions director in the Pacific Northwest. Jeni helped some of you get here and I am certain that the enthusiasm and love she has for this place came through when you worked with her.

Now, having been a student here, I have no doubt that this place has challenged and trained you with the technical skills you need to be a Captain for Delta, an air traffic controller at JFK, an intelligence analyst at the CIA, a rocket scientist at SpaceX, a space physicist at NASA, the manager of LAX airport, or whatever path you've chosen, and you'll be ready to pull on those technical skills in any situation.

But I'm here to share with you that Embry Riddle has prepared you for so much more.

Embry-Riddle has prepared you for so much more than just a career or a profession. Let me share a quick, personal story to show you how.

Like most Embry Riddle students, I am a planner. I make plans for everything, and I stick to them. So, not surprisingly, I had a plan for my life. I wanted to be an airline pilot and I had a plan to make it happen, complete with intermediate goals and a rigorous timeline. And so I studied here, earned all my certificates and ratings, and got a job with an airline straight out of college, thanks to a fantastic internship through Embry Riddle. Two weeks after graduation and at 21 years old, I was learning to fly a regional jet. I was on track to have exactly the career I'd planned for.

And then (pause) 9/11. You all know that it was the beginning of a very bad time for the airlines, and, like many other relatively new pilots, I eventually lost my job.

I can assure you, this was not part of my plan.

I had some serious soul-searching to do at this point. Start over with another regional airline? Or embark on a different journey?

I was living in Washington, DC when I was laid off, where there happens to be a wealth of aviation opportunities. I used my background to get a job at the

FAA doing aviation safety data analysis. Was it my passion? No. But it was a job – and a paycheck – and I was challenged to tap into my skills that existed outside the parameters of my technical training. It was an important part of my journey in figuring out what was next for me. My *resourcefulness* was being tested. I had to determine if I could further my career in aviation outside the parameters of the “life” in a cockpit.

While I was at the FAA, I connected up with an Embry-Riddle friend who was also based in DC. He mentioned an opening for the Director of Communications at the General Aviation Manufacturers Association.

I looked at my friend. Really? Communications? Am I qualified for that?

But the more we talked about the job, the more he helped me realize that through opportunities like the Golden Eagles Flight Team and volunteering as a student tutor, I had accumulated the soft-skills, the ‘people’ skills, that perfectly complemented my technical skills.

My confidence grew. He introduced me to the team and GAMA’s new boss. I interviewed and ultimately was offered the job.

Hopefully you can begin to see where I’m going with this...I went from a technical career as a pilot...to a communications director...writing, working with the media, traveling the world meeting our industries top leaders, negotiating plans and programs with colleagues...very different than climbing

into the cockpit, running through the checklist, firing up the engines, and completing a takeoff!

I went to the best aeronautical and engineering school in the country to become...a communications professional.

And that has led me to where I am at AOPA today, with a position that does not have the word “pilot” in it, but where I can fuel my passion for flying and ensure it is maintained for future generations. Nowhere in my plan did I have a path for “association executive.” In fact, I’m sure most association employees didn’t grow up with that dream in mind, because let’s be honest, pilot or astronaut or space physicist sounds considerably more enticing.

Embry-Riddle has prepared you to be the technical professionals that you came here to learn to be. And many of you will go on to do that.

But while your *technical* skills may get your foot in the door, your *people skills* are what will blow those doors wide open.

Your work ethic, your communication skills, knowing how to get along with people – and having a positive attitude – will make problem solving, delegating, motivating, and team building so much easier.

Having the heart to share *appreciation* for the multiple opportunities offered and, perhaps most importantly, understanding the need for *resourcefulness* to

map out your future...and *resilience* to adapt in our ever-changing society. These are the soft skills that will be crucial to your career success.

Another soft skill that you probably aren't expecting to hear - but I think is really important today - is having the discipline to put your dang phone down once in a while.

But remember that the people with whom you interact with at work and rely on to get the job done are right in front of you and not on your screen. Look people in the eye, listen...not just hear...but actively listen to their message, connect and build relationships that come with genuine caring and attentiveness to one another. There is a message we communicate to others when our phones are front and center. Think about how you can make people front and center.

By having attended this University, I know these skills are percolating inside of you. But these are the skills that over time will be the most challenging to mature, since they have little to do with knowledge or expertise. They are instead closely linked with your personal character. It will take conscious effort on your part, ongoing practice, and a commitment to self-development to improve your soft skills. After all, we are pretty technical thinkers, operating in a people-centered world.

I have to work on mine every day. One of the important soft skills I mentioned earlier is to have the heart to share *appreciation*. So, I am going to practice some appreciation today and make it my closing focus:

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today. It is an honor for me to come “home” and reflect on what this university means to me and how it has prepared me for a career in aviation.

I appreciate how hard it is for me to not look at my iPhone 300 times a day.

I appreciate the lifelong friends I made here and the sacrifices my family made to help my dreams come true.

I appreciate having had the opportunity to attend a University that I still feel like I *belong* to.

As you leave today with your diploma and your future, I hope you will also carry with you the realization that Embry-Riddle has prepared you for more than you can imagine. I also hope you will always feel like you *belong* at Embry Riddle and that you maintain a special connection to each other and to this place. I’m proud to be part of your family. Congratulations Eagles!