

## CHESHIRE ACADEMY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

June 1, 2003

When I graduated from Cheshire at the beginning of the 1960's, here is some of what we did NOT have; cable television, cassettes, CD's, cell phones, color television, computers, digital cameras, digital watches, dvd's, e-mail, the internet, microwave ovens, satellite television, vcr's, videos, and voice mail.

Here, as I recall, is what we did have; radio, television, records, telephones (but not in our rooms), - and oh, Elvis Presley, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Some things really are eternal.

So what is the point? Well, what has changed in these 40 years is not so much what we have in the world of information or entertainment and ideas, but how much of it... we have. And what this means is that each of you has a whole lot more choices and more responsibility for making them than your parents or grandparents did.

Their world was dangerous and complicated. So, of course, is yours. But you have more of a chance than they did to find out what is happening in every aspect of the world around you and what your role in it might be.

Let's take some examples: First the fun stuff: music. In 1960, you could buy a record. There were 78 rpms, 45 and 33. You could listen to the radio - top 40 stations mostly in which the play lists were decided by the music companies. Today, you can choose to access music from cd's, regular radio, satellite radio, MP-3s, file-sharing, cassettes, videos and cable, not to mention live concerts which were always the most exciting way to hear music anyway.

But you get to choose what music you want to hear, when or even whether you want to pay for it and how much. This is a lot more sophisticated than just flipping a switch. More choices, more responsibility.

The same is true with television. Once there were three networks and a few local independent stations. As a viewer you watched what the network executives wanted you to watch. Well, that is obviously not true today. There are, on most cable systems, at least 100 channels and in a few years, it really will be pushing 300 to 500. You decide. For the first time this winter, more people were watching basic cable television than the old networks. So again, what that means is that you have a lot more in the way of choices and clout. It's up to you.

Or, to get serious. Take the news: You have newspapers, National Public Radio (which was invented 30 years ago) all news cable, the web, the networks and magazines. In effect, rather than being handed the news by a few gatekeepers, you have the opportunity to choose the news you want and become your own editor-in-chief.

Television was already in almost every private home when I was at Cheshire, but I do not recall ever seeing one anywhere on campus. I was already a newspaper reader, but most of the other students weren't, except for sports. Instead, one of the highlights of the day was going to the mailroom, which was in what we called the Jigger Shop, and seeing if there was a letter from a girlfriend. We wouldn't have

recognized the term “snail mail”. Phone calls from home came about once a week and were taken on a pay phone in the hall. So think about it. Today you have music, entertainment, news and instant messages, contact with friends and family in so many more ways than we used to, in so many different formats. To a very large extent, you can choose what you do with your time.

So what does this mean for the class of 2003 from Cheshire Academy?

As I said, it means that you have to be a lot more selective. You have a lot more responsibility. You have to learn how to make choices rather than be presented things decided by some one else. You cannot use the fact that you have limited options as an excuse for not taking advantage of all that is possible.

Sure, in school there are requirements, languages, science, and humanities. But in college you will find that time is much more your own than it ever was in high school and you’ll be deciding how to fill it.

I think when we look back at how the world is changing we'll see that this issue of choice, the opportunities to make them and the obligations these choices bring will turn out to be one of the most important developments of our time.

And it is not just technology that has changed. Gender, race, religion in the United States are much less likely to determine how your life will turn out than used to be true. For women, and minorities, in particular, (the problems Muslims are having these days are a disturbing exception) American Society is more open than it once was - even though there are still many ways that that prejudice is limiting.

Still, in the early 60s, no one would have imagined that the most influential television talk show host - Oprah - would be a black woman; or that the National Security Advisor to the President, Condoleezza Rice, would be a black woman; or that the most popular movie star of the moment - Halle Berry - would be a black woman.

Or, think about the military. In 1960, all of the young men in this class would face the prospect of being drafted. Today, of course, there is no draft. Women are about 15%

of the armed forces and occupy combat support and leadership roles. Joining the military today only happens by choice. And for many people excluded from the services or marginalized in the past, the military is now an opportunity, and excellence is rewarded by steady promotions based on merit.

That is the grand picture. But the individual story - the one that affects each and every one of you as you embark on the next chapter of your life - is going to be about the fact that you will be making more of your decisions for yourself. The modern world means that so much more is possible than used to be true, but there is also much more to take advantage of it all.

The next time you choose a piece of music to download or a television show to watch or a book to read - as a book publisher, this is a plug to keep reading books - remember what an amazing thing it is to have so many choices. Don't waste them. Learn what it is you like best, what you want and how to get it and then go out and make sure you do it.

Being young and well schooled is one of the great privileges of our time. So be in charge of you, be your own editor-in-chief and the odds are that 40 years from now, one of you will be back talking about all the ways our lives changed. Of course, you will probably be doing it by satellite for a virtual graduation on the planet Mars.

In any case, it's your world. Make the most of it.