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Good evening and welcome!

Welcome, distinguished guests, students, faculty, administrators, alumni, friends, and a special welcome to family in attendance. First off is Dave Murray. Dave has been a family friend and has known me since I was a young teenager. He has witnessed my growth and transformation and was ecstatic about coming. So welcome to him and his friend "Anthony," who turned out to be my aunt who surprised me by flying all the way over from Seattle just for this. I welcome Mrs. Juanita Wilson and Ted Wilson. I will go into much greater detail about their impact on my life, but for now I welcome my surrogate parents who looked after me during my time here at this special place. And it is special.

Now some of you may be wondering, visibly, "Uh, Suli, that can't be your family." But that's where I'd say you're wrong. You may have relatives, but not every relative is family. Family are those who nurture, who support, who love, who encourage, who aid. Not blood, not wealth, not color, not clan/tribe. Family for me runs deeper than the superficial meaning. That's something I've learned over the years.

Until today, at my tender age of 43—and yes, I say tender because 43 believe it or not is not old haha—SAS remains the brightest, happiest memory in my entire life, and hopefully tonight I will be able to share with you the tremendous impact this school and its amazing people had on my life and its trajectory. Thank you, Stacey [Duprey '85], Chesa [Profaci '80], Joy [McGrath '90], and Danica [Tisdale Fisher], for inviting me to speak here tonight, and I hope what I share is in the worst case insightful, best case inspirational. It's profound to me to be standing here now when it seems like just yesterday I was sitting just where you were. Of course, much more hair on my head. Less hair on my face. Fewer forming love handles. And much less stress. Enjoy your youth because no one said getting old looks like this.

I'm going to try to fit 43 years of life into 45 minutes so bear with me, but ever since Stacey asked me to speak back in June, I have been preparing. On my commutes to work, on the weekends when I relax, at night when I often reflect on things before going to bed. That's because I'm a firm believer in the adage that failing to plan is planning to fail, and I wanted to ensure that I crafted a speech that was intentional in its approach and covered the most defining moments of my life so far. I say "speech" but think of it more as a family discussion because at the end of the day St. Andrew's is, and forever will be, family. It doesn't matter what year you are or what state or country you live in, if you are a part of the SAS community, then you are my family. That said, please know that Uncle Suli is from Brooklyn. And I'm very proud of that. In fact, I mention in my SM bios that my blood type is BK+; that's how serious I take it. The reason why Brooklyn is so important is that it has shaped me into who I am today, and it is a foundation built on authenticity and genuineness—or as we affectionately like to call it, keeping it real. So this conversation is meant to be real, and that's what I will do. I will share my moments of strength and courage as well as vulnerability ... my successes as well as my failures and setbacks.

The focus or title of this discussion is Resilience in the Pursuit of Excellence. That is because

there is no excellence without adversity, and adversity requires resilience. As it regards adversity, I was immersed in it before I even left the womb. I was born to a loving mother, whom I cherish, in Crown Heights Brooklyn, a part of New York City whose troublesome history is well documented. Whether it was drugs, crime, racial tension, or senseless violence—you name it—Brooklyn had it. I was also born and my father left us before I even got a chance to meet him. Imagine that. I've never met my father. And for those of you born with both [parents], I'd like you to imagine a world where one of your parents isn't there. From a young age, I had to figure out this world and my place in it. I had to figure out how to be a man all by myself. And not just any man. A Black man in the United States of America, something that comes with, let's just say, a unique set of challenges. So according to statistics, I'm not supposed to be here standing in front of you right now.



According to statistics, I shouldn't have gone to SAS. I shouldn't have graduated from Amherst and NYU. I shouldn't have been a director at Johns Hopkins, nor currently at Yale. But this is a common refrain in my life that you will come to recognize all night. Barriers and obstacles are only there to be broken. Adversity should not define you; it should motivate you. That is to say, one should not wallow in their own misery, crying woe is me, when adversity strikes. Don't get me wrong—adversity is not pleasant to deal with, and its spectrum varies from manageable to unbearable. But at the end of the day, a good friend of mine, Lindsay Lowa (now Roznowski) used to remind me 30 years ago: whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Thus, you should look at every bout of adversity as an opportunity. Opportunity to reflect. Opportunity to grow. Opportunity to make your comeback greater than your setback.

Another significant obstacle early in my life was when my mother was diagnosed with MS back in 1989. It's still unknown how people obtain the disease, and its effects can be devastating. My

mother, who was a career-oriented woman, had no choice but to be sidelined, rendered disabled and unable to work for the rest of her life. It was upon me now to become the breadwinner for our immediate family, and having realized this very early, I became hellbent on making sure I took care of my mother. The funny thing about her is that although I know she suffers in silence, she's never once complained or showed distress. She just simply gets it done, and growing up with her I have internalized perhaps an uncanny perspective on adversity. There's nothing that I don't think I can face, and there's no problem too great; if my mother can suffer and do it with a Coke and a smile then, *child*, I have absolutely nothing to complain about, regardless of what it is.

Although I was born into adverse conditions, I was blessed with something that would become a defining characteristic and trait: intellect. From a young age my mom saw that there was a little something different with her child. Whatever toys or puzzles she gave me, I ate them up. Whatever books I was given were devoured. And we're talking four or five years old here. It was clear that I had an insatiable appetite to learn, even until today, and it was this appetite that singlehandedly changed the trajectory of my life. The beauty of intellect is that it is not confined to color. It's not confined to a specific region. Not height. Not wealth. Not political affiliation.

Nothing. Intellect is intellect, and in this rapidly evolving world of ours, you cannot understate the power and currency of intellect and academic study. Knowledge truly is powerful. William Wallace famously said, "They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom." I add to that, that a person can say whatever they want about me, do whatever they want, but they'll never take away my secret weapon: intellect.

As I stated, my mom recognized this early on and her main mission became trying to feed this appetite in the best way she could. Fast forward to my 7th grade year at IS 383, a school for gifted and talented students in Brooklyn, and it was here that I learned about an organization, Prep for Prep. Prep for Prep is an incredible and highly selective organization which seeks out talented and gifted underrepresented students in New York City and if accepted, prepares students for a rigorous academic program that lasts a grueling 14 months. And I say grueling because until now, it remains the most difficult thing I had to do in my life. No joke. I still have PTSD some 30 years later.

Imagine being 12 years old but having to go to summer school five days a week, from Monday through Friday, on a 1-hour city train ride, mind you, for the whole summer. And not just studying 7th grade material. We were studying pre-calculus, trig, reading Shakespeare and Chaucer, and we had two hours of homework every night. In the summer! I did love learning, but c'mon! I also wanted to chill with homies, play basketball, and enjoy the summer. Not in 7th grade. That was my life for 14 months. During my 8th grade year, I also had to go to Prep for Prep every Saturday in addition to 8th grade studies. And every Saturday, trust, that we would receive enough homework to last the whole week. Brutal. But something that was comforting was knowing that I was considered among New York City's intellectual elite—I think a few hundred students, maybe even thousands, apply—they only gave out 60 spaces. I was truly amongst the best of the best. But as you can see being the best of the best necessitated assuming tremendous responsibilities. Excellence requires resilience.

If I simply looked at the road I had to traverse for the next 14 months, it would've been enough to make someone think twice. But this program singlehandedly changed my life. And I recognized that graduating from St. Andrew's would put me in the best position to have the

authority to steer my life in whatever direction I wanted it to go. If I wanted to be president, SAS would equip me with the tools to do so. After successfully completing this program, students are placed in the top boarding schools in America: Choate, Hotchkiss, Deerfield, Andover, and Exeter. I chose St. Andrew's. My visit was so amazing. I had never seen so much green. So many trees. So many cornstalks. So many smiles. I had only understood frowns up to then and was taught to mistrust smiles back in NYC. People are only nice when they want something from you. But that mentality changed when I came here. I realized, it's ok to smile. It also didn't hurt that *Good Morning America* had just so happened to be filming here that day too. So it was all a sign. I fell in love with St. Andrew's from the very first moment. That love has only increased since I recognized its true value when I departed.

It's important at this juncture to contextualize just how crazy my experience was being transplanted from Brooklyn to a leading, exceptional, not to mention affluent, boarding school. I mean *Dead Poets Society* was filmed here. How much better can it get, right?! The contrast in the double life I was now leading was salient. While some of my friends went to the Hamptons, Jackson Hole, or Switzerland for Thanksgiving break, I returned home, usually by Greyhound bus back to Brooklyn. The summer after my freshman year, I came home to the news that a childhood friend, Oscar, was just locked up for being an accessory to murder. Wrong place. Wrong time. But as a 14-year-old his life was essentially ruined as he was facing a 30-year prison sentence that would commence when he became an adult. That could've easily been me. While I analyzed the literary genius of Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson with [Bobby] Rue, [Jon] O'Brien, and [Darcy] Caldwell at SAS, I'd equally analyze the lyrical genius of Tupac and Biggie verses when I went home to my friends. Navigating two such disparate worlds was a very challenging experience. It often forced me to painfully question my identity. Am I loyal and Black enough for the hood? Am I not too Black at SAS so as to avoid being stereotyped and placed in a box? It was NOT easy, but my friends and family here at SAS made the experience as pleasant as you could possibly imagine. I've never found such a loving and welcoming community. It was here that I was able to grow, nurtured by the genuine concern and care of faculty and administrators alike. For that I thank you from the depths of my soul. In such formative years, my experience at St. Andrew's laid the groundwork for how I would conduct myself in the world moving forward.

St. Andrew's was absolutely amazing. I made great friends, many of whom are still very close today. I got exposed to different types of music, although I was hesitant to like any of it for fear of having my Black card taken away back home. Dave Matthews, Cher, Enya, and U2 were some of the bands I'd hear on a Saturday afternoon strolling through the halls of Sherwood Forest (do y'all still call it that?). This bridging of cultures was critical for me because people back home had perceptions of white people that weren't accurate. I was able to dispel any weird notions.

Similarly, at SAS there were misconceptions of Black people that I was able to dispel. My presence here was the only thing that made that possible. THIS is the value of inclusivity. Not just to meet a quota. But to really enable the conditions where different people can meet and share and learn from each other.

While SAS was truly amazing, there were two life-defining moments that were not. The first one was when I tore my MCL in the second game of the football season my sophomore year, and the second one was when my dear roommate of four years, Chris Wilson, the wonderful son of Mr./Mrs. Wilson here in attendance, tragically passed away in a car accident. The pain and

shock of that still lives with me to this day. With regards to sports, I had just started learning to play basketball in the 7th grade and quickly fell in love with it. This was due to watching MJ do amazing things on the court. My coach, Coach Rue, never liked him as a Pistons fan, but unfortunately MJ was the one I chose for inspiration and whom I modeled my game after. He taught the world a relentless pursuit of perfection, demanding only the best in himself and of his teammates. And as a result of his body of work, he is arguably considered the best player to ever play. He didn't just become that overnight. He worked hard. Extremely hard, and so that was what I taught myself too. I would spend 6 to 8 hours in the gym on a Saturday just practicing by myself, and I was developing at a fast rate. After my freshman year, I was able to dunk, which forecasted a major breakout year my sophomore year. That came to a grinding halt when I tore my MCL in the second game. I'm not going to talk about the pain, or how it swelled to a balloon, or how I had to wear a cast for weeks and a brace for many months thereafter. It was difficult. And I felt my childhood dream of playing basketball professionally somewhere was in jeopardy. Again, I thank Mr./Mrs. Wilson because they were the first to come to my aid as they were at the game and they took great care of me, especially with those wonderful baked chocolate chip cookies. Lord knows one of the most important things you can do after tearing your medial collateral ligament is to chow down on some delicious cookies. It helped ease the pain.

Adversity is like a Skittles bag which comes in all different flavors and colors, except the colors are often darker and the taste more bitter. However, I was determined. I rehabbed and rehabbed and rehabbed because there was no way I was going to miss the sophomore basketball season.



Long story short, once I got better, I continued to practice and elevate until I started getting noticed and recruited from top D3 schools. When it was all said and done, I held multiple records my senior year (some of which have been broken) but my main accomplishment was to

be the first player in SAS history to score 1,000-career points, and I was also the second leading scorer in the state my senior year at 23.3 points a game. (No, I'm not an MJ fanatic to that degree where I purposely averaged that amount, but it is a pretty cool coincidence). I was also invited to the Delaware All Star game, not something that St. Andrew's basketball was known for. Not bad for someone who tore their MCL. Looking back, I may not have had that burning desire to excel had I not torn my MCL, and I was able to use that as a motivational tool. It taught me a very, very powerful lesson in my teenage years. In the words of the late great Jim Valvano who died from cancer: Don't give up. Don't ever give up.

The other more tragic moment was when I learned that Chris had passed away suddenly. We were roommates for four years. I've never met a sweeter, funnier, goofy-at-times kid than Chris. He also had an infatuation with Coca-Cola, and we'd have weekly re-up visits from his poor mother and father who had to lug these cases and cases upstairs for us. Chris was a true homie, and where I come from being a homie is a big thing. There are friends, and there are homies. A homie is someone who you'd do anything for. That was our relationship. I was looking forward to seeing how he would develop and contribute to the world. That all ended one day when I got a distressed call from Mrs. Wilson informing me that Chris had gotten into a horrific accident that ended his life prematurely. The range of emotions was unbelievable. Sheer grief and sadness that a beautiful soul like this was taken so early. That a loving mother and father lost one of two children. An older brother who also went here, Josh Wilson, lost his only brother. That we would never know where Chris would've ended up today and what contributions he would make to the world. The greatest emotion I felt at the time was shock. I just couldn't believe he was gone, and it was the first time in my life that someone my age had passed. It taught me the fragility of life. And it only invigorated me to live by the adage YOLO (you only live once). I was determined to be the best that I could be, if not merely for the simple fact of honoring Chris and his life story, and not being wasteful with life and the opportunities it presents. While we make plans for next month, next year, and the next several years, tomorrow is not promised to any one of us. Chris' death taught me that at a young age.

After an amazing time at SAS, I thought I would have an equally pleasant time at Amherst. I was wrong. No shade on Amherst, but it was not the best experience for me, socially. Academically it was great, but socially it was weird. Not as warm, physically, and as a Black man, I'm sorry, I love the sun. Winters are brutal, but Northeastern winters can be exceptionally brutal. Don't ask me why in the world I decided then to buy a house in Rochester, NY, but that's a discussion for another day. Maybe I'll leave that for a next talk which will be entitled Silly Life Mistakes that Every Sane Person Should Avoid. The most painful part of Amherst was basketball. While I was a high school standout, I mostly sat the bench at Amherst even though I routinely outperformed teammates during practice. I'd even have teammates ask me why I wasn't playing. My only response was, "Ask the coach." I will never know why my coach didn't play me, but it was painful nonetheless. Once again, I had to sit by and watch my hoop dreams fall deeper and deeper into the toilet.

However, I used that as an opportunity to focus more on being professional and preparing for a career. Even in St. Andrew's, I had internship opportunities. I worked at law firms during the summer at SAS and that progressed to investment banks during Amherst. I was all about getting that *schmoney*. If a translation is needed that means a whole lot of money. The summer before my senior year, I got an incredible opportunity to work at Deutsche Bank. I earned 10k that summer and was on the path to success. If I performed well, I'd have a job offer. And that's exactly what I did. While other summer analysts were busy on their phones all summer, I took tremendous initiative while I was there, always asking for work and asking to learn something.

That quickly caught the eyes of associates, and then vice presidents, and then managing directors. By the end of the summer, I was working directly with a vice president as a measly summer intern. Look at the power of conviction. Look at the power of intellectual curiosity. Look at the power of pushing oneself to excel. I performed well and was indeed the only one in my summer group to be offered a job, which I initially accepted. I was all set to make around 80k right out of college which in those days was significant. I was all set, or so I thought.

It turns out that during that summer, I began to question many things, namely because I had so much time to think, sitting in my office on Saturday afternoon. You see, I had to work 60 to 70 hours a week, and that amount of commitment begged me to question the value of money and material things. Yes, I'm making a lot of money—but what is my quality of life? I don't even have time to enjoy it. Additionally, my bad time at Amherst pushed me into a very dark personal place. I wasn't happy. I wasn't fulfilled. I had everything in my hand, but my heart was empty. You have to understand the magnitude of this. As a poor Black kid from Brooklyn who's already beaten tremendous odds to be in the position, and now I'm questioning everything. I started to question life itself. Was my purpose here only to get *schmoney* and be comfortable? Or was it to make an impact? I realized at 20 years old that the corporate world was too cold and empty for me. And so after long deliberations, I decided to turn down the job as I needed to do important spiritual work on myself. I needed to get *me* back, and all the money in the world wasn't going to achieve that. It was as if I had gotten to the mountaintop only to realize it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. It was then that I had to channel my Brooklyn upbringing and be brave. Where I come from you cannot be afraid. People smell it, and if you're identified as weak, then you'll be taken advantage of. So I've always been the courageous type and what is more courageous than following what your heart tells you in the face of criticism, disbelief, and doubt.

People thought I was crazy to turn down that job. People thought I was crazy to return to my Muslim heritage and practice my religion. People thought I was crazy for growing a beard, which is absolutely hilarious because now Messi, LeBron James, and even politicians rock beards. What do you do when it seems like many people don't get you? When many people see what you've done as a failure? As though you've thrown your life away? The first thing to do is not pay any attention to any of it. It is your life. You only have one. Live it for yourself. Don't live it for other people. But now it was senior year, and I didn't have a job. I needed to figure this out real quick. I decided to lean back on something that was extremely familiar to me. Can you guess what it was? Teaching and learning. I decided to learn how to teach English. For me, it would be a great way to learn how to teach; I would be interacting with other cultures; and I was excited about this new career. I also had a mountain of student loans so I needed to earn as much money as I could. It turns out the Middle East was the region that was paying the most, and so after I got my M.A. at NYU, I headed to Saudi, another major chapter in my life.



I begin this section of the talk by saying I'm a lover, not a hater. I love all people. I truly do. And while my experience as a Black man has been documented tonight, it's just that. I was born Black and that was the hand I was dealt. But I never welcomed nor accepted any ideas or ideologies that preference one group of people over the other in any form. A human being is a human being. And we should be judged by the things that are in our control, not by the things that we cannot control. No one comes into this world asking to be a certain color, come from a certain lineage or family, or have a certain amount of money. All of these things are predetermined, and so how could I judge someone on something they had no control over? It's oppressive and makes no sense and will never make any sense to me.

Biologically I recently read that humans share 99.9% of the exact same DNA. That leaves .01% to account for all our differences. Yet the world would have you believe that we are 99.9% different. Let's go one step further. If you remove the skin of every human being, guess what, we all look identically the same, so using inductive analysis we can determine that things like race and beauty are literally only skin deep. Racism is a mental, emotional, and spiritual disease that I will never understand, but that I will fight until the day I die. The only colors I care about are black and white: of the heart. Is your heart black or is it white? And the other color of love is green ... because being from New York, it's all about that *schmoney*. I diverge.

Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, is an interesting country. They have developed much in the past few decades, and it was interesting to witness this. Equally interesting, or disturbing depending how you look at it, was the treatment I received there. Islam is a religion in its essence that promotes equality, and that was another reason I was excited to live there. Although I had not experienced explicit racism in the U.S., I knew it was all around me. I thought that a country that in principle was supposed to uphold great virtues would welcome me with open arms. I was wrong. And I'm not going to generalize because there are people there that I met who had hearts of gold. But I cannot shake these other experiences which unfortunately defined how I was going to be living for 17 years. As for the experiences themselves, let's see. I was called a slave in public. I was spit at in public. Someone threw my groceries from the

conveyor belt in public. Why you might ask? Because I was an African. And Africans got little to no respect.

The funny thing is as soon as I spoke in my Brooklyn accent that behavior changed real quick. Wait? He speaks clear English. He can't be African. But oftentimes when I said I was American, they refused to believe me. No. Where are your parents from? Your grandparents? Your great great great grandparents? What the hell does that have to do with the price of beans? I would often go into a diatribe about the history of slavery and how actually no one in America are actually Americans except the indigenous people. But that wasn't enough. Over time I simply got tired of explaining myself and said, "If you don't believe me, then that's on you." But what difference did it really make? Unfortunately in Saudi, a lot. People are judged by their wealth. Their color. Even their tribe name. It was disturbing to witness. All of this will come back full circle as I explain my transition back to the U.S.

Living in a society where you're not wanted, where you're judged based on everything else *but* your ability, was beyond disheartening. However, I chose to fight and deal, rather than cower and walk away. I would spend the next few years focusing on developing myself because I'm in constant pursuit of excellence, regardless of the context. Even though I was a teacher, at every job I assumed administrative positions. I wanted more authority and input on the direction of programs, so I volunteered to do so. For how much more you ask? Zero dollars. For 17 years I assumed a tremendous amount of extra responsibilities. Why you ask? Because I'm a sadist and just love pain and torture. No. It was because I knew that I'd be gaining valuable administrative and leadership skills that will serve me in the future should I return to the U.S.

Over 17 years, I became a coordinator and a program supervisor for the entire country. I published many articles, the majority of which were in Oxford University Press, whose acceptance rate was only 10%. I met princes. I worked directly with the Ministry of Education on a five-year strategic plan to address teaching quality. So essentially I used my time in Saudi not to wallow in the abhorrent racism I swam in on a regular basis, but rather to develop myself and excel, because that is the single most important thing to me. I could not waste a SAS, Amherst, NYU education. To whom much is given, much is required—and I was given a lot. I had to give a lot. I had to produce. The one moment in Saudi that allowed me to do that, on a level that I was satisfied with, was when I met Mutah Beale.

Mutah Beale is formerly known as Napoleon of the Outlawz, a rap group started by Tupac Shakur. In the absence of a father, Tupac, believe it or not, was a central figure in my life as a teenager. Beyond his poetic brilliance, he spoke up for justice, and more importantly explained for me what it meant to be a Black male in this world. His main message, among many, be Black and proud regardless of what society says. He defined himself. He didn't need validation from external sources. That was how I was going to live my life. Tupac was a tremendous inspiration and anchor for me during the lowest, darkest, most challenging times in my life, so naturally I would listen to this new rap group, the Outlawz. Amongst my favorite members was Napoleon. It was the crafty way he played on words that captivated me. It was also clear he suffered a lot, and I was happy that he escaped many of the dangers of urban life and was successful. Little did I know, we would meet, in Saudi Arabia of places, become best friends, and that he would honor me with getting to tell the world the story of his life.

I'm not going to get into too many details, but for anyone who needs a real-life example of battling and surviving adversity, it's the story of Mutah Beale. His parents were murdered in front of him when he was three, and over the course of his life many of those closest to him were murdered or passed away. Yet, he turned his life around and is doing very well. We entertained

the idea of writing a biography on his life in 2019. He knew I was a writer, and after reading some of my work, he was impressed. But I warned him, I said, "Mutah, I don't do things on a small level, and you're a celebrity, so I hope you're ready for what I'm going to try and attempt to do." I explained to him that his message and story is one that needs to reach masses of people, not just people in urban environments or casual rap fans. No. This is a *human* story, and it needs to reach as many people as possible. So, my task was to package his story in a way that is readable, accessible, but academic and authentic. This was a tremendous opportunity to communicate to the world, vicariously through Mutah, some of the things that I was exposed to as a Black kid growing up, and I would be able to do it in a way that it would be celebrated. Let's be frank: there's nothing glamorous about guns, drugs, violence, and substance abuse. But I had the opportunity to convey this unpleasant world in a way where casual fans can enjoy a good read, while intellectuals can delve deep into examining many of the problems that plague our society.

I used my research skills to make sure his anecdotes were supported with evidence so as to increase the veracity of the book. It was also important for me to write the book in such a way that it may be even taught at college. In the end, I pulled 257 citations from 150 sources, the book was well received, and I became a published author of a book entitled *Life is Raw: The Story of a Reformed Outlaw*. Not only that, but the book was so well-received that it earned an entry as an exhibit in the Hip Hop Museum, the first of its kind dedicated to the preservation of hip hop history. Mr. Rue, Mrs. Caldwell, Mr. O'Brien, I think I was paying attention in your English classes and thank you. Mr. O'Brien, I told you I thought I deserved an A- on that paper instead of a B+. Additionally, on a serious note, the book is currently being converted into a movie, which is set to release next year. But I didn't tell you that. I mean I did, and I technically shouldn't have but you're family. You all get that exclusive access.

That book opened up many doors, including meeting other celebrities, and as of right now I'm working on my second book which is also a celebrity biography about a rapper named Loon, who used to rap coincidentally with none other than Puff Daddy. No comment, and no Loon didn't attend any crazy events. However, here is yet another opportunity to write a book and showcase my academic talent on the world stage. My challenge is to make it even better than the first. Excellence. That is what you should always be targeting.

So as I'm wrapping up here, Mutah was the shining light of my experience in Saudi, and it was necessary because simultaneously while I was enjoying the success of our book, those clouds of darkness that hung over me in Saudi had gotten darker.

My director at the time was moving on, set to return to Canada after many years in Saudi. He was so impressed with my work ethic, competence, and leadership that he recommended that I succeed him as director the following year. He forwarded my name and gave me a tremendous endorsement. However, the Saudi administration told him to his face that they would never allow a Black man to run an English department that was 90% white. That was it. I had had enough of Saudi, and it was time to come home. When I arrived back in the U.S., I returned with a much deeper appreciation for America and its value.

While we get a lot of things wrong, one thing for sure is that legally, you have opportunity. Legally you are only judged on your performance. Legally there is no discrimination. I applied to many jobs when I returned, and I was fortunate to be appointed Director of Academic Programs at Johns Hopkins Institute for NanoBioTechnology. So wait. You're telling me that I wasn't qualified to lead an English department in Saudi, yet I'm qualified to be a director at a world-renowned, elite academic institution? Make it make sense please. It was then that I

realized that all the extra responsibilities I had assumed with no extra pay finally paid off. I came back to the U.S. and my landing spot was Johns Hopkins. You couldn't write a better story. After two and a half years at Hopkins, I decided to move on, and I applied for a director position at Yale, where I was accepted yet again. Wait. You're telling me that I wasn't qualified to lead an English department in Saudi, yet I'm qualified to be a director at a world-renowned, elite academic institution, not once but twice? Make it make sense. Well, it makes perfect sense. Here in the U.S., in principle you are only judged on your ability and performance and for that I was certified; I was accepted into the upper echelons of American academia because I belonged there. And rightfully so.

I end this by leaving you with some pearls of wisdom from Uncle Suli. Seek out opportunities and make the absolute most of them because they may never return. When life punches you and knocks you down, don't cower, for we all get knocked down at some point and in one way or another. It's not a matter of getting knocked down but how fast you can get back up. Don't let anyone ever tell you that you can't do something. Belief in yourself is the most powerful weapon you possess. Don't seek external validation. If you work hard and are committed to excellence, your achievements will validate you. Be kind, be generous, be courteous. Regardless of where you ascend to in life, be humble and treat others as you would like to be treated. Humility is a sign of intelligence just like arrogance is a sign of stupidity. Cherish your years here. When you're 43 like me (and I'm not even going to do the math of what I'll be when you're 43), I'm almost certain you will look back at your time at SAS and these years will be the best of your life. Always learn. It is through learning that you make impact and succeed in life. The world is truly your oyster, and no one can stop you except you.

This speech wouldn't be complete without thanking the many family and friends who supported me throughout my journey. Thank you, Stacey and Danica, for arranging this for me. Huge thanks to Tad Roach, the former headmaster here. He taught me how to be a man, he pushed me intellectually, and more importantly, he believed in me. Thank you to his wife Elizabeth. Thank you to my family and friends who've been so supportive and loving throughout. Look at my aunt, who's like my second mother; she traveled all the way here from Washington state which is a testament to her love and support. Thank you to all my teachers here: Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, Mr. Hyde, Mr. Rue, Mr. Colburn, Mrs. McTaggart, Mrs. Ramirez, Mr. Austin and Mrs. Matouk, Mr. Bates, Mr. Duffy, Mr. Speers, and Joy and Hope McGrath. I thank Mr. and Mrs. Wilson who have been my surrogate parents throughout my life. I thank Dave for coming. I thank Mutah and Loon. I thank all the haters, doubters, and naysayers. I thank Brooklyn. And lastly, I thank adversity, for without it I wouldn't be the man I am today.

Be yourself, be brilliant. Pursue excellence and be resilient. With that I drop the mic and open the floor up for any questions, if there are any.