

Thank you, John. Thank you to the Board of Trustees and the faculty and staff of Long Trail School. And a special thank you to the graduating class for asking me to be your commencement speaker today. It is a very great honor to be able to share this special day with you.

Before I wrote this speech, I asked Deb and Sean if I could meet with the senior class. It was a wonderful opportunity to get to know the students, and to gain a better understanding of their hopes and dreams for the future. At this meeting they gave me specific instructions – tell a story, keep it short, say something in Swahili.

So first, a story:

A year ago in northern Kenya, 5 Rendille women wrapped their babies to their bodies and walked from their small village in the Kaisut Desert to the village of Korr. From their village of Ongeli, it was a walk of 35 kilometers in 110 degree heat. They had nothing to protect themselves against the roving bands of livestock raiders, or the lions and hyenas that prowl this arid landscape of occasional trees and bushes. When the five women reached the town of Korr, they seated themselves on the ground outside the only shop in town. They had no food to eat and no water to drink.

At the end of the day when the owner closed the shop, they were still seated at his feet. No word was said but the conversation was understood. The women were hoping for credit so that they could buy a little tea, sugar and maize to feed themselves and their children. With their husbands far away tending the few remaining livestock after another hard drought, their only other hope for food was the sporadic food shipments by relief

organizations. That night they slept on the ground outside the shop. The next morning when the owner opened the shop, there was even a bigger crowd of women quietly seated on the ground.

By mid-morning the five women of Ongeli village gave up and started the long trek back across the desert. Upon their return, the other women in the village came out to greet them, only to learn that the trip had not been successful.

Those families are some of the first climate change refugees in the world. While they are used to hardship and adversity, the droughts now come too often, and they are too severe. Their lives as nomadic pastoralists is over.

The good news in this story is that those five women from Ongeli village are now part of one of the BOMA Fund's programs that helps them start a small business and earn an income. Now just four women make the long trek across the desert as one must stay back and run the shop.

The women hire donkeys and a warrior to protect them as they make their way across the desert to Korr to buy goods from the wholesaler in town. When they return to Ongeli they set up their wares in a hut of branches and sell food and other simple items at a far reduced price from the retail shop in the main village of Korr, the same shop where they sat and begged for credit just a few months ago. They are earning enough money to feed and educate their children and they have savings of over \$220, money that will be used if one of their children becomes sick or injured.

This past March, I sat inside the hut of Namericho, one of those five women from Ongeli Village. Namericho has never been to school. She is tall with soft hair, sparkling eyes and seven children. As we drank the warm sweet tea of the nomads, I asked about her children and her elderly mother. We talked about the drought and the hardship that they had endured. When I asked her about the new business, about the 4th or 5th thing she told me was about the profits and savings that they now had. First, she told me that she no longer had to rely on her husband to feed her children. She told me that she is now a respected member of the village with an important role. She told me, “I can be resourceful now, Mama Rungu. When we went to Korr people did not see us. Now they know my name. I am a business owner, I can pay for things, I have respect.”

Namericho lives in one of the poorest, most neglected places on the African continent. But when I talked to Namericho, she did not define herself by the income she made – she defined herself first as a person with purpose and dignity. And that is your challenge as graduates today.

You and your classmates are part of a tribe of young people who face a world of amazing complexity. You will face far greater challenges than Namericho and that small band of five women who live in the Kaisut Desert. You will have a harder time creating change and living lives of purpose because our world is so noisy with distractions. Your greatest challenge will be turning down the volume of the band so that you can hear that single note that will define for you a life of passion and purpose. It is much easier for

Namericho to find purpose in life because she has so little. It will be harder for you because you have so much.

I grew up in a small farming village in western New York much like the villages that you all come from. My parents could not afford to send me to college. I was fortunate to win a scholarship to St. Lawrence University and when I had the opportunity to attend an abroad program at the University of Nairobi, I jumped at the chance. It was the first time that I had ever flown in a plane, and I flew to Africa, an experience that would change my life. After years of raising a family and a series of careers I have found my life's work.

My days are filled with passion and purpose and I could not wish a greater thing for you than a life defined not by what you receive, but by a life that is humbled by all the opportunities we have to make a difference.

So can you change the world? Is it possible to find that single note in all this noise that will sing to you – that will define how you will live a life of passion and purpose?

When I met with the class of 2010, I asked them that very question. Can you change the world? Their responses were at times cynical and at times inspiring. They talked of challenging times, of friends killed, of feeling inadequate and sad and unsure of their future. After a few more minutes of conversation someone said, wait, there can be change in the world, because Long Trail School changed me. Isn't that changing the world? I asked more questions – how did Long Trail School change you?

They told me that they came to Long Trail and felt safe and sheltered and part of a caring community. For the first time, many students told me, they felt like they belonged. They felt they had had more opportunities and were better prepared for life after Long Trail.

Your generation will be defined by how you live your lives. And you have had great role models in your teachers and the special community that is Long Trail. Every single person at this extraordinary school extends their time beyond what is expected because of their singular commitment to you. And in that, they have changed the world.

Now, it is your turn and today will be your first step. Today, you don't need to be famous, or rich, to change the world. You just have to make your parents proud, and you are doing that today.

The only thing I can give you now is advice. And it is a small list of five things:

1. **Turn down the noise.** A year after I graduated from college I decided I wanted to live in New York City. I was burdened by rent, school loans and medical bills from a ski injury. For that first year, I knew that if I packed my lunch and walked to work that left me with \$4 per day for anything else. If I went out at night I drank water and sipped it because I could not afford to pay for drinks. I was lonely and broke but I was not burdened by all the noise. For the first time in my life, I started to hear that single note that would be the soundtrack of my life.

2. **Listen.** When I worked with refugees in London, I worked alongside a man that was a splendid Irish Catholic priest. He had great advice: “Never pass up a great opportunity to shut up”. I’m still working on that one. But I also know that I work in an industry with some very loud voices – rock stars and actresses who want to “save Africa”, economists and social entrepreneurs who think they can end poverty in Africa. But it is not their ideas that will change the world. It will be the ideas of people like Namericho who are burdened by that poverty that will inform our greatest and most simple solutions. We need to spend more time listening to people like Namericho and less time listening to celebrities. You can do that too, because we have Namericho’s in our midst. We just need to listen to them.

3. **Belong to someone and some place.** I work with the nomads of Africa but I am firmly routed to my family and this place called Vermont. It will always be my home and I am so very grateful to come back to this beautiful land that is so safe and clean. Belonging is the place that fills your heart. It gives you strength and the courage to do what is right.

4. **Travel.** We only have to think of that day in September, 2001, to know that we are no longer isolated from what happens on the other side of the world. We need to care about people like Namericho and her band of women in the Kaisut Desert because from a nearby village came a young man who helped blow up the American Embassy in Nairobi. It is in our best interest to care for one another

globally and it is much easier to do if you see it for yourself. I want you to experience a sunrise on the equator and a sunset on the Andamann Sea. I want you to know how a good Muslim man lives his life and how a poor person finds joy when they have the resources to care for themselves.

And finally,

5. **Find your passion.** There will be a time in your life when someone offers you an opportunity – it may be a flight to Africa. It may be a job in a field that you could not imagine yourself ever working in. It may be a person who encourages you to take a class that you know nothing about. Whatever it is - take it. Even if it is scary. Do it. Do something scary every day.

When I first started working with the pastoral nomads of northern Kenya 5 years ago I traveled to villages that had never seen a white person before. They had never seen a vehicle or a radio or a camera. My presence frightened the children who would scream if I moved too suddenly. Now I can go to that village and drink tea with the women and the children climb up on my lap. They tell me “You were like a different bird to us, Mama Rungu, with strange wings but now we can see you.”

I was just different, but now I am unique. It is all in our perception of how we see each other.

When you ask a Rendille in northern Kenya if you can take their picture the words are literally translated to “may I take from you your soul?” They fear cameras because they think that the person taking the photo will be able to see through their bodies and into their soul. In October I will be returning to Namericho’s village. I will take with me a

picture of the Long Trail School graduating class of 2010 and I will pin that picture up on the inside of Namericho's hut. I will tell her about all of you. And when she looks at that picture, it will not be your sameness that she will see. She will look for your soul. She will see a group of unique individuals. That picture will lead to countless conversations for months on end as each member of the village looks at each individual in that picture. And they will see a group of young people as unique as the wings of a bird. In Swahili they say "Kila ndege huruka na mbawa zake"

Every bird flies with its own wings.

I wish for you the courage to follow your passion. I wish for you God's grace.

Congratulations to the Long Trail School graduating Class of 2010.