



Commencement Address – May 20, 2017 By Jabari K. Smith '01

Good morning family,

It definitely feels good to be back 'home.'

Let me share a quick story with you. It's early morning, May 26, 2001, and I wake up to loud music playing from the east wing of the Despain Dorm. I get up and enter the room of my suite mate next door singing Snoop Dogg's "Wrong Idea." Then John Jang, my roommate, joins in on the celebration, and so did others. And at that moment, we all realized that our lives were going to change forever. Because on this day, we were ending one chapter of our lives and starting a new one.

Now I want to keep it real with y'all. I was very excited, of course, because, up to now, this had been the biggest day of my life. But I was also terrified. I mean scared to death. I'm a grown up now; more responsibilities, challenges, and life changes are never predictable, right?

But I didn't need to be scared. You know why?

Because everything I needed to live a fulfilling, successful life I had already learned by attending Orme. What's interesting about this discussion is the fact that I'm not about to tell you something you don't already know. Sometimes life will bring you back to what you know. To show you what you didn't understand. And I'm here to show you that today. This conversation is about the unique experience of Orme that you and I share. There are a number of principles that you can apply in your daily living, but today I will share three. These are going to help you achieve success throughout your life.

Here they are.

- You've learned to adjust and adapt.
 - You've learned to embrace cultural differences.
 - And, you've learned to be accountable and independent.
1. First, let's talk about adjusting and adapting. By adjusting and adapting you are essentially stepping outside your comfort zone. Your success can sometimes be measured based on how well you adapt to situations and how successful your transitions are. I started out as a 7th grader at Orme. At 13, I was extremely excited by this opportunity, but I was also terrified of this new transition. Knowing that this was an opportunity of a lifetime, I knew that it was imminent for me to leave my environment of Los Angeles where, at the time, the city was at the height of gang culture and drugs.

Although Orme brought new opportunities, it also brought new challenges. Here was my dilemma. I brought 'baggage' along with me. I had a learning disability. I didn't know how to communicate my thoughts and feelings effectively. I lacked in structure, and I had a disregard for authority. Initially when I arrived at Orme, I was constantly struggling because I was comfortable not pushing myself when it came to academics; I was comfortable not following authority; and I was comfortable not wanting to adapt to this new way of life. My struggles were so severe that I

can name several occasions when I almost got expelled from Orme. Like that time I chucked a chair across the room because I received a poor grade on one of my papers. Yeah! Not a good idea. I knew that if I wanted to survive here, I would have to adjust and I would have to do it very fast.

So, here's what I did: I adjusted. I adapted. I got comfortable being uncomfortable. I became more aware of my environment; I understood my struggles and I found people within the community who could help me. But most importantly, I embraced the challenge as an opportunity.

2. Next, I had to embrace cultural differences. As I mentioned before, I'm from LA, which is a pretty big city, but can still be isolated for some people. My first thought when I stepped onto this campus for the first time was "WOW"—cowboy boots, dirt roads, horses, cows, barns and adobe buildings. Only thing that was running through my mind was, "How am I gonna keep my Michael Jordan's clean!" But my challenge was that, out of the 200 kids who were on campus, only eight of them looked like me. Where I'm from in Los Angeles, I was only exposed to African-Americans and Hispanics. My experience with people from other races and ethnic backgrounds was limited. But soon my biggest challenge became my greatest opportunity.

As you can see, Orme is very diverse. But so is the rest of the world.

Orme's diverse culture is a great opportunity for all of us, because this is a reflection of what the world looks like. Orme allowed me to accept other cultures but, most importantly, Orme allowed for other cultures to accept me. We all collectively benefitted from learning about and appreciating each other's differences. This is a skill that I still use today in every aspect of life. While at Orme, I formed meaningful relationships with people from Pakistan, Brazil, Austria, France, South Korea, Japan and Germany, as well as people from the East Coast, West Coast, South and the Midwest. Obviously, we all come with different perspectives of life.

To this day, I look for ideas that offer a unique, original perspective—because in business, things that are different but unique are often things of value.

3. Finally, let's talk about accountability and independence. This school teaches us how to be independent and accountable the moment we step foot on campus. Let me share with you: We have to wake ourselves up; we have to clean our own rooms, wash our own clothes and attend all of our mandatory obligations without being told to do so. That may not seem like a big deal now, but do you realize how valuable that is to be a part of a structured environment without someone holding your hand? It sets the tone for your independence in your adult life. Because I was taught these values, I was light years ahead of the other freshmen when I got to college. It's those key habits that I developed from being at Orme that are the driving force behind my ambition and success today.

So I leave you today with these three things alone. They should be powerful enough to help you get ahead of the curve. As I said earlier, the moment you stepped onto this campus you began learning what it takes to be successful in life. And if you're sitting here right now in front of me, you already have what it takes to be successful!

Jabari K. Smith '01