

Scripps College 2009 Commencement: Gabrielle Giffords, part 1

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Speaker 1: Good morning, class of 2009. Parents and family, faculty and trustees. It's an honor to be asked here back to Scripps today, this college where I learned so much about myself and life and the world. This place is very meaningful for me, not just because of my own history, but for what it continues to do for hundreds of women every year. This exceptional class that's sitting here before me where my class at 16 years ago. And for all the women who came before and for all the women who will follow us.

Speaker 1: It always seems strange in life to return to a place where so many things began. I vividly remember my graduation day right here on Elm Tree Lawn. The morning was filled with friends and family photographs and flowers, parking tickets still to be paid, and, yes, some patching to do in my dorm room. I do confess that toothpaste wasn't used exclusively on my teeth that morning. That afternoon, my next chapter of my life began as I drove off in my old Ford pickup truck headed back to Arizona with a 1946 German motorcycle loaded into the bed.

Speaker 1: Yes, I had received a Fulbright scholarship to study the Old Colony Mennonites in Chihuahua, Mexico. But a couple of months earlier, I had an epiphany. I wanted to become a farmer. And so I decided the very next day, I was enrolled in economics courses at the University of Arizona. Just precisely the right coursework that I would need so I could solve world hunger. Seven decades ago, a woman named Ellen Browning Scripps, whom we will never know, had in mind exactly that kind of lunacy when she founded our College in 1926.

Speaker 1: Scripps, you see, is not just a place, but it's an idea. The paramount obligation of a college is to develop in its students the ability to think clearly and independently and the ability to live confidently, courageously, and hopefully. Many things have changed since I first received my Scripps degree. But what Scripps taught me about life and how I should live it has not changed. While writing this speech, I reflected on my last week in the United States Congress as the first woman to chair the House Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee.

Speaker 1: Just last Saturday, I was at the Hubble launch where I saw a crew of highly trained astronauts blast off into space to perform necessary fixes on our Hubble telescope. Wednesday night was a late one. I was out until 2am observing a Navy SEAL Hostage Rescue Exercise in order to learn more about piracy. Questioning our Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff happened on Thursday. I was questioning what the DOD was going to do to deal with our fighter GAP shortfall.

Speaker 1: And if I look a little sunburned today, it's because just yesterday I participated in the reburial of the Tucson Civil War soldiers by escorting the remains over three hour long on a ride with 200 freedom loving leather and patch wearing Harley Davidson riding VFW Motorc. And yes, I wore some sunscreen, but it felt very hot that day, just like it is today. Another highlight from last week was when I finally had a chance to meet our incredible Scripps president.

Speaker 1: Along with his wife Mary and of course the chairman of the Board of Trustees, Roxanne. We were gathered at this exquisite black tie dinner to see a Scripps graduate, Ruth Owaitis, being awarded the Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Award. So it's funny to think that a woman born in the 1800s would have created something that prepared me years later for all of these different types of activities. It's remarkable that our Scripps founder, herself an entrepreneur and a philanthropist, understood fundamentally the challenges and the splendor that life affords us.

Speaker 1: She created this wonderful college for exactly that purpose. A place to think and to grow and to learn. A place to explore. A foundation that we can return to time and time again for inspiration. Graduates, I'm going to be honest with you. I really don't remember a lot about my commencement speakers, whether it was high school or Scripps, or whether it was Cornell University. Although if my speakers perhaps would have put telescopes, pirates and bikers in the same paragraph, surely I would have remembered that.

Speaker 1: So let me tell you now something that is totally obvious that you won't forget, that today you are at the termination point of one of the best educations this country has to offer. You have spent a few glorious years receiving enormous gifts of knowledge and discipline. In my case, I learned what an existentialist was and why I didn't want to become one. In astronomy, I learned about black holes. They totally freaked me out. And if you saw the recent Star Trek, you'll realize they still freak us out today.

Speaker 1: And I learned after not caring for math in high school to become passionate about calculus. I learned about war for the first time, staying up late at night listening to the coverage of Operation Desert Storm and witnessing student rallies and peace demonstrations. I learned about natural disasters and a community's response due to the earthquakes here in California in the early 1990s. Some of these lessons were part of the school's career curriculum, and some were not. But all of these lessons were gifts.

Speaker 1: And with great gifts come great expectations. We are here today. Your professors, your parents, your friends. We all expect you to go out into the world to be restless and creative and inspiring with all that you have been given. But there's something else. Something more important than that responsibility for women today. Something that, with all my research, I couldn't believe that Ellen Browning Scripps ever actually talked about. Probably because at her time she was just up to her ears.

Speaker 1: Fighting for basic women's rights in our country. But I know if she were with us today that she would mention it.