

# **STEPPING STONES TO LEADERSHIP**

## **KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

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**H. Lavity Stoutt Community College  
Eighteenth Graduation Exercises**

**Paraquita Bay Campus  
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## STEPPING STONES TO LEADERSHIP

To the Honorable Premier Ralph O'Neal, President Dawson, members of the Board of Governors, faculty, staff and the graduating class of 2011, I want to thank you for this honor that you have bestowed upon me by inviting me to speak at this graduation ceremony.

This institution has a special connection to the University of the Virgin Islands. We are partners in the quest to educate and transform this part of the world. There are numerous individuals from this institution and the BVI who are now part of UVI, and contribute everyday to making it a great university.

The students from this institution are always welcomed at UVI, and we see them as some of our most successful students. So, I am honored to speak to this college community as you gather for this auspicious occasion.

I believe that higher education is more than a process that one goes through in order to earn a degree. For me, it is one of the most important stages in the development of individuals who play such a critical role in the life of nations and in the world. I believe that higher education is a critical step on the pathway to an elusive but grand destination which we sometimes call leadership. Therefore, I want to speak to you today from the theme, "Stepping Stones to Leadership."

As you sit here on the verge of graduating, I hope that you have a deep understanding of what you have just accomplished and what lies ahead of you. For the last two years you have been engaged in a process that is preparing you to assume the role of leadership now, and in the future. This has been more than an educational experience; this has been a laboratory for **leadership development**. If you went through

it with your eyes open, then you understand how you have been challenged, stretched and pulled into a deeper understanding of life and of yourselves. You have learned more than facts and formulas. You have been tested on the essence of what type of person you were and hoped to become in the future. H. Lavity Stoutt has been more than just an institution of higher learning that you have attended; it has been your **stepping stone to leadership.**

I focus on leadership because it is the most desperately needed ingredient in our quest to develop stronger and more vibrant communities and nations. It is because of leaders – with vision – like H. Lavity Stoutt that this college exists. It is because of leaders like the ones on this stage that communities, nations, and families prosper.

The problems you face in the British Virgin Islands and the problems we face in the U.S. Virgin Islands are not problems of resources and time. These problems often exist because we have not adequately developed, nurtured and supported the type of leadership that is needed to serve our present age. This is not an indictment of any of us who occupy positions of leadership in this region or the world. It is a statement of fact about our collective limitations as human beings and as educational institutions.

Because, leadership is not limited to a few who occupy select positions; leadership is a birthright that we all are entitled to, but too many have forsaken. Leadership in the grandest sense of the word is not about positions at all; it is about values and choices; about human frailties and triumphs; it emanates from the soul of those who dare to be true leaders.

Deepak Chopra, bestselling author and one of the world's renowned spiritual entrepreneurs, in his recent book, *The Soul of Leadership*, states, "At the deepest level, a leader is the symbolic soul of the group. His role is to fulfill the needs of others and,

when each need is met, to lead the group on to fulfill ever higher needs, lifting the group's potential at every step. The inspired leader's power base comes not from other people but from her very being, and the path she walks is guided by her own soul. "

If Deepak Chopra is right, then the education you have received, and the education that you will receive in the future, are not just about what lies within your head, but what lies within your heart, and how you use both to fulfill your purpose in life.

Each one of you is called to be a leader now and in the future. But you will not be able to fulfill that dormant potential unless you stop now, look deep within and decide from whence comes your strength, and for what purpose you are here.

This is not a statement about religion. This is a mandate about what it will take for you to be truly successful, and what it will take for you to use your skills, values and talents to make the BVI and the world a better place.

The reason enlightened leadership is so desperately needed from you is because we face such difficult and challenging problems. Many of those problems are a result of the absence of enlightened leadership and they will only be addressed if we can tap into the soul of leadership. In 2011 we still have students who are joining gangs and engaging in activities that are harmful to themselves and those around them. From violence to educational underperformance; from crime to enormous disparities of wealth that create separate worlds within the same community and region.

Even in the BVI, where some of the social problems are not as severe as in the United States or the USVI, there are still challenges. According to the 2009 Demographic Profile of the BVI,

- Infant mortality rates have fluctuated from a low of 3.5% in 2005, to 28% in 2008. When children are dying at high rates so soon after birth – it points to larger problems in regards to our health care system, the health of mothers, and overall quality of life.
- Teenage pregnancy rates – though steady over the last nine years, appear to be rising as well.

Despite the beauty of the mountains and oceans all around us, poverty still exists in the BVI.

Throughout the world, there is abuse of power in government and non governmental entities. Abuse of women and neglect of our elders are not crimes of our finances but crimes of our souls. What type of leaders and leadership will lead us away from these patterns and into a brighter day?

If the BVI, and the Caribbean, in general, are to move from being primarily paradises for tourists and visitors, but a purgatory for others, then we need economic and business leaders who are overflowing with vision, creativity, and mental and spiritual intelligence. I believe I am looking at those leaders. But the question is whether you believe you are those leaders today.

### **The Next Stage of Development**

To become the type of leaders which I just described – leaders who have the potential and power to address the type of problems I just described, then you must not only see your experience at H. Lavity Stoutt as a stepping stone to leadership, but you must be courageous enough to make more steps. This is not the end, this is your beginning. The next educational step must be one that propels you to the next level of your development. You must approach it with an even deeper sense of determination

and purposefulness. You only get out of the educational experience what you put into it and what you purposefully demand from it.

If you only go through the motions at the next step then you will limit yourself and limit your leadership potential and your potential to transform this island nation and this world. If you are only striving to be good enough, then why waste your time? We need young men and women who will not settle. With integrity and respect, you must challenge the educational paradigms that you are within so that you push yourself to your limits.

Even if your next step right now is not to further your education, but to go into the work world, then go with the same determination and passion. Go, knowing that you will have to master yourself as well as the tasks that lie before you. Your work environment, just like your educational environment, is a laboratory for leadership development.

### **What This Island Nation Needs**

Your education so far has been an investment on your part, but also an investment by this island nation. The future of the BVI is in your hands. The quality of life that you strive to achieve will greatly enhance the destiny of this island nation. So today is a time for this island nation to celebrate the greater hope and faith being placed within the universe with your graduation.

### **Invitation to UVI**

I hope that one of your future stepping stones into soulful leadership will be the University of the Virgin Islands. We, like H. Lavity Stoutt, are committed to not only transforming individuals, but transforming an island nation and region.

Though the ties between our institutions are strong, I want to declare today that we would like for them to be even stronger:

- There should be a clear and systematic pathway from H. Lavity Stoutt to UVI;
- We must work to develop articulation agreements that build this pathway;
- We must work on various research collaborations;
- Our new Hotel and Hospitality Management program is a natural starting point;
- Our marine and environmental sciences program is another.

We must remove the academic and financial barriers so that more of your students can easily transition to UVI. Therefore, President Dawson and I will work to ensure that the pathway from H. Lavity Stoutt to UVI is firmly established and that the pathway is transformed into a highway.

### **My Charge**

So I charge you to enjoy this moment as you relish in the joy of your accomplishment. These times are rare and deserve our collective celebration.

But I also charge you to walk in the light of your own experience and try to spread enlightenment as you go. The world can be a confusing and depressing place if that is the lens through which you look. Look for the stepping stones in life that will take you to an elevated place from which you can view the world. Leadership is like sitting on the top of the highest mountain you can imagine. You sit there not because you are better than those in the valley. You sit there because you have worked on your soul, mind and heart enough that you can see beyond the limitations, barriers and obstacles that others cannot avoid. You sit there not because you want to rest and just gaze at the

beauty. You sit there to chart your strategy for how you will work to make life better for those who hurt and die in the valley.

Each of us has our own mountain tops and our own valleys. The question is not whether you will have mountaintop experiences, but what will you do with them? The folks in the valley need you to make their lives better.

So in conclusion, I leave you with this poem:

## The Invitation

Oriah Mountain Dreamer

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living  
I want to know what you ache for  
and if you dare to dream of meeting your  
heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are  
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool  
for love  
for your dreams  
for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring you  
I want to know if you have touched the  
center of your own sorrow  
if you have been opened by life's betrayals  
or have become shriveled and closed  
from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain  
mine or your own  
without moving to hide it  
or fade it  
or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy  
mine or your own  
if you can dance with wildness  
and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your  
fingers and toes  
without cautioning us to be careful  
be realistic  
to remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are  
telling me is true.  
I want to know if you can  
disappoint another  
to be true to yourself.

If you can bear the accusation of betrayal  
and not betray your own soul.  
If you can be faithless  
and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see Beauty  
even when it is not pretty  
every day.  
And if you can source your own life  
from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure  
yours and mine  
and still stand on the edge of the lake  
and shout to the silver of the full moon,  
"Yes."

It doesn't interest me  
to know where you live or how much  
money you have.  
I want to know if you can get up  
after a night of grief and despair  
weary and bruised to the bone  
and do what needs to be done  
to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you know  
or how you came to be here.  
I want to know if you will stand  
in the center of the fire  
with me  
and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or  
with whom you have studied.  
I want to know what sustains you  
from the inside  
when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone  
with yourself  
and if you truly like the company you keep  
in the empty moments.

This is the type of leader that the future of the BVI demands. This is the type of stepping stones you must walk upon if you are to reach that hallowed place of leadership.

I am confident that this Class of 2011 will walk this path and I wish you God's speed on your journey.