

## **Warren Wilson Commencement Speech, 2025**

Thank you so much for the kind introduction.

I'm honored to be here today—with all of you—Class of 2025; President Fernandez, parents and family members; and the alumni and faculty of Warren Wilson. Congratulations to everyone and well done!

I'd like to give a special shout-out to our first-generation college graduates. You know who you are. I am a First Gen graduate, too. You overcame additional obstacles to make it here today. Take pride in your achievement but never forget the communities where you began your journey.

Today, we mark the accomplishments of our graduates; but most of you wouldn't be here without the love, support, encouragement, and faith of your family and friends. Don't forget to thank them today as you relish your success.

And speaking of family, tomorrow is Mother's Day, so let's take a moment to recognize all the mothers here today.

And in honor of them, I have a classic Mom joke to kick us off:

**A mom walks into the bar and she's carrying a ladder.**

**The bartender says, "Hey lady, why did you bring a ladder to a bar?"**

**And she says, "Because I heard the drinks were on the house."**

There's so much I could speak about today. This is my first time here, and I am not intimately familiar with your campus.

But I do know that this community has persevered during an extraordinarily difficult year. You faced unexpected obstacles—closures, damage, uncertainty. And yet, you adapted. You rebuilt. You thrived.

That is the essence of resilience, and that's what I want to talk about today.

It turns out I know a thing or two about resilience.

From that kind introduction, you know that I served as the 11th Archivist of the United States. I ran the National Archives and Records Administration in our nation's capital.

In many ways, it was a dream job. I woke up every morning with the singular goal to protect our nation's records, heritage, and history. Everything I had done in my life led to that specific role.

And then, one night, I found out by a tweet that I had been dismissed from my position – by the President of the United States.

Now, how many people here have ever been fired? A show of hands? Come on, you don't have to be shy!

Until that moment, I had never been fired from a job in my life. I can tell you – this isn't the way you want to experience it. The next morning, my face was splashed across national news, the subject of eye-catching headlines and speculation.

There was no cause or reason for this action. I was a victim of politics, plain and simple.

Now, I like to think of myself as an optimist – a glass half-full kind of person.

But I admit, this episode tested my spirit.

It wasn't because I was out of a job, or I was fearful for my livelihood. It was because the work I was doing – work that I believed mattered to the American people – had been abruptly halted, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I truly believe that things happen for a reason, and oftentimes, they occur in a particular order. Before I became the Archivist of the United States, I was diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer. It was a small yet aggressive tumor. To treat it effectively, I had the full regimen of treatments – surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and then immunotherapy.

What an ordeal that was! But I got through it, through the grace of God, my family, and friends. And even though I had no idea at the time, that experience prepared me for what was to come – namely leading a federal agency through some of the

most turbulent times in its history. And when I lost my job earlier this year, I drew strength from those same reserves.

Resilience isn't just about enduring hardship. It's about transformation. It's about discovering new ways forward when the old path is closed. History shows us this time and again.

The suffragists fought for women's right to vote from 1848 to 1920. The women who started that social movement knew they would likely not live to see its completion, yet they pushed on, believing that all citizens deserve a say in their government.

Abolitionists fought for decades to end slavery in the United States. Harriet Tubman returned to the South thirteen times to rescue enslaved people and bring them to freedom, risking her life and liberty each time.

Gay rights leaders refused to be silenced at Stonewall in New York City, which changed the trajectory of gay and lesbian life in America. Years later, activists persisted as the federal government refused to address the AIDS crisis.

And after the horrific terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Americans throughout our diverse country rallied together to rebuild what was lost, demonstrating that even during the darkest hours, our national spirit was stronger than hate.

What do all these stories have in common? They remind us that resilience is not simply enduring hardship. It is the moment when adversity forces us to find a better way forward.

In fact, resilience forces our hand to identify creative solutions and learn things about ourselves we would have never realized if we weren't faced with adversity.

On a personal level, the courage I was able to muster to face hostile congressional hearings, vicious trolls on social media, and public criticism from both political parties didn't manifest itself from the successes I had experienced in my career.

Quite the opposite. The bravery that resides within us comes from facing our worst moments, the trials that test our souls.

When we survive those episodes, we develop new skills, perspectives, and strengths we wouldn't have known about otherwise.

In 1872, the suffragist movement sent Susan B. Anthony and other women to cast their ballots in the presidential election. It was only after their arrests and eventual convictions that suffrage leaders learned the Supreme Court did not consider the 14th amendment as a sufficient guarantee for women's voting rights.

This series of events, which were devastating at the time to the suffragist movement, led the women to realize they needed a constitutional amendment of their own.

A frequent rallying cry of the suffragists was the phrase "From Darkness Into Light."

I can't think of a better rhetorical construction of resilience than that.

At some point in your life, you will face a challenge that will feel insurmountable.

You may lose a job. A dream may not come to fruition. An election outcome may devastate you. A personal loss may shake you to your core.

When you face a crossroad like this, do not despair. That will be your first inclination, and it's a natural reaction. After all, we are human beings. The status quo of life is comforting. Change tests both our patience and courage.

When you face these challenges, give yourself grace to adjust to the situation before you. At a certain point, however, a detour will appear. And that is when paralysis is no longer your friend.

The key to resilience is recognizing that fork in the road. One path is a continuation of your current course. At first blush, it might appear as the easier route to take, because its terrain seems flat and unencumbered.

The other path is less predictable. The uncertainty might scare you at first, but make no mistake my friends, this is the route you want to take. Resilience is only possible when risks are taken and educated gambles are wagered.

Otherwise, there is no point to suffering or loss.

Your own campus has demonstrated this. After the flooding caused by Hurricane Helene, you didn't just rebuild—you adapted, you strengthened your bonds as a community, and you found a better path forward.

The same is true for each of us. It is almost impossible to view a difficult situation with a bird's eye view. But I can guarantee this – when you look back on your life and its twists and turns, you will conclude that the moments of greatest strength and growth occurred after the darkest hours.

That is the miracle of resilience – the creative learning space it affords us. And it appears exactly when we need it the most.

I once again found myself in that space after my unjust dismissal several months ago.

When the dust settled, I found a community I didn't know even existed. People had noticed my leadership. Organizations, universities and colleges, and thought leaders from across the political spectrum reached out to remind me that there are countless ways to make a difference.

The actor Matthew McConaughey features a great metaphor in his memoir—he writes about red lights and green lights. Green lights appear after red lights.

So, when you hit a red light in life—take a beat and look for the green one. And when you see it, put your foot on the gas and don't look back.

My last observation about resilience is the most critical one for you to remember.

Thus far, I've talked about the resilience of individuals, including my own experiences.

But resilience isn't only important for people. It's important for our civic life and health.

A resilient democracy does not crumble in the face of adversity. It withstands threats, holds to its principles, and demands that we show up to defend it. And that responsibility belongs to all of us.

Democracy is not self-sustaining. It requires participation, engagement, and sometimes considerable sacrifice.

Democracy isn't inevitable. We must roll up our sleeves and accept our responsibilities so that we can continue to protect the rights and freedoms we have.

At some point in your life, you may be asked to serve – to volunteer, to speak up, to stand for what is right.

When that moment happens, I urge you to ask yourself this question - if not me, then who? And if not now, then when?

We never know what life has in store for us and how we might be asked to contribute. And sometimes, depending upon your circumstances, it might be impossible.

However, if we all do our part and answer the call as well as we can, then our democracy will have the resilience it needs.

A healthy democracy requires basic civic knowledge, free and fair elections, volunteerism, constructive and civil disagreement, and a vibrant free press. These factors will promote democratic resiliency.

As individuals, we must work hard to develop and maintain our own resilience when we are faced with challenges or defeat. Our democratic system requires the same tenacity.

In closing, I hope I've provided some optimism to what lies ahead. There will be times in your life when the world says "no" to you. When this happens, put on your earphones and turn up the volume. Surround yourself with voices who shout back "yes."

Thank you for inviting me to speak. Congratulations to all the graduates, "go owls" and "hootie hoo!"