

The Advantage Point - Keynote Address by Kantis Simmons

Hey, what's up Kantis Simmons here. Now, can I be honest with you? Like really? Can I be honest with you? I hate this pandemic. Yes. I hate this pandemic.

Now, you say, "Kantis, why do you hate this pandemic?" Well, it's very simple. The pandemic has messed up the Major League Baseball schedule. I don't know if it's gonna be delayed or fully canceled. That's why I hate this pandemic. You see, I had this big goal that I wanted to accomplish this summer and that was to complete my bucket list. Right? So I've had on my bucket list, the goal of going to all of the Major League Baseball stadiums. Right now I've been to Tampa Bay. I've been to Philadelphia. I've been to, actually, I'm sorry, this is one my grad school, Lehigh. I've been to, this is Georgia Tech, my other grad school. I'm a football fan to Atlanta Falcons. I'm sorry, this is my golf hat. Oh, back to baseball...but hey, Anaheim out of Anaheim, California. Chicago, with the Chicago Cubs. New York with the New York Mets. San Diego Padres and my home team, the Atlanta Braves. And actually, I've been to 19 out of the 32 stadiums.

And because of this pandemic, I've had to make an adjustment. And sometimes in life, adjustments have to be made while reaching your goal. Baseball is a sport that I grew up on. Baseball is also an important part of my transition. I used to play youth baseball and I was playing shortstop one day. And I was at this park called Medlock Park. And I was playing for the Eagles. We had on orange uniforms and I was wearing the number 13. And I remember this day so clear: Playing shortstop I had a line drive ball hit to me, pow! I caught the ball. I dropped the ball, my glove fell off. I picked the ball up and I threw the guy out at first base. And as I was walking back over to pick up my glove, I heard a parent in the stand say, "Oh, look at his fingers. He's so special."

Now the next inning I got up to bat. Pow! I ran down first base. I hit a single, safe. And then, I heard this one parent started talking to some other parents and it became a conversation. And the parents was like, "Ooh, look at his fingers. He's so special."

The next inning I got up to bat and this time I was batting left-handed. You see I was a switch hitter, I could bat both right and left-handed. And so this time, pow! I hit a double. I turned first base, I slid into second. Safe! And then the parents started roaring, "Yeah! Look at his fingers. He's so special. Hercules, Hercules, Hercules." You know, for many years that word "special", it bothered me. I saw it as negative, but as I've matured and as I've gotten older, I've realized just how "special" I am.

You see some years ago when I was participating in the marching band, I was the drum major. I was the guy that had the whistle in his mouth and I remember my very first game as a drum major; I had the suit on. I had the white marching band gloves on. I brought the band on the field and it was time to play the very first song, the "Olympic Fanfare" (imitates trumpet blasting). And as I was directing the band, I saw something flapping in the air. Now at the time, I didn't know

what was flapping in the air, but then I quickly realized it was the marching band gloves I had on. You see, the fingers in the glove that didn't have fingers, they were just flapping around in the air. And so I'm thinking to myself, "Wow, everybody in the stand is talking about my flapping fingers." And so I went home and I'm thinking to myself, "Ok, what can I do to these marching band gloves? And those fingers were flapping down. What can I do to fix it?" So I grabbed some scissors and a needle and thread and I was about to cut the flapping fingers off and sew them up. And then my mother, she burst into the bathroom, boom! My mother said, "Son, what are you doing?" I said, "Mom, I'm cutting off my flapping fingers." She said, "What?" I said, "Mom, I'm cutting off my flapping fingers." She said, "Huh?" I said, "Mom, I'm cutting off my flapping fingers because everybody in the school is talking about me." You know my mam looked at me, she said, "Child please. Nobody's talking about you." She said, "Son, put the scissors down, put the needle and thread down, and take those silly gloves off. She said, "Kantis, I want you to hear something and never, ever, forget it." She said, "Son, quit looking at what you don't have and think about all the amazing things you do have. Yes son, quit looking at what you don't have and think about all the amazing things you do have." And you see that exact phrase helped me get through school. That exact phrase helped me complete three amazing college degrees. That phrase helped me land a job as a scientist at NASA Langley Research Center and later go on to also be a scientist at CIBA Vision, developing contact lenses.

I am special. I'm awesome. I'm unique. I'm wised. I'm favored. I'm loved.

I believe there are five things that you're gonna need to stay determined to be successful in this life. Yeah, five things I believe that you're gonna need to stay determined as you go through this life.

Number one is this: you have an assignment. Yes, you have an assignment. Now, if you really think about it, right? We have eyes, we have a nose, we have heads, fingers, we have arms, we have gifts, we have talents. There are some things that make us happy, there are some things that make us sad. But guess what? We are all different. Yes. We are unique. We are awesomely made, but guess what? Our uniqueness, our awesomeness, our differences, our gifts, our traits, our personalities - I believe that we were all put on this earth so we can individually fulfill a greater assignment. Yes. I believe that the good Lord created us to such a point that he said, "You know what, that's my child. They are awesomely made to fulfill an assignment."

Number two, let me just be honest with you. You're going to have to acknowledge some things in life. You know, this was my finger mess, right? And this was the thing that often told me, "I can't, I won't, I'll never." This was the thing that held me back because of how I felt about this, caused me to make some other crazy and doubtful mistakes. But I had to acknowledge -- you know what? I'm great just the way I am. This right here, it hasn't stopped me. You see some people, they battle with insecurity mess, they battle with relationship mess, they battle with job mess. Some people battle with forehead mess. Some people battle with five head mess. Some people battle with just all types of mess. But I've learned to turn my mess into my message. And

I believe that as I've acknowledged just great and how awesome I am, that today I'm the coolest guy with 7.25 fingers. Yes, 7.25 fingers. I acknowledge that.

But number three, I've had to ask some hard questions and I've had to answer some hard questions. Early on I went to my mom. I said, "Hey mom, what happened? How did I lose my fingers?" And so on one hand my mom said, "Back in the '70s, doctors were doing experiments on birth control, and I was taking this medicine, and I believe the medicine may have caused you to miss some of your fingers. And then later on she told me, while she was pregnant, she slammed her finger in the door. And when she slammed her finger in the door as a pregnant mother, it affected my finger. You know what? At the end of the day, I've had to ask some hard questions but I had to answer them as well, too.

Here's one question I had to answer, "Kantis, is your uniqueness stopping you from being a success?" And I thought about it. I said, "No, I've just made an adjustment." "Has your uniqueness stopped you from going through school?" "No, my uniqueness didn't stop me from going through school." "Has your uniqueness stopped you from getting three college degrees, working at NASA, being a scientist?" And I said, "No, it hasn't" So if your uniqueness can't stop you there, guess what? Your uniqueness can't stop you there. So I have to ask the hard questions, but I've had to answer some hard questions.

You know, in this world, there are some times people use differences to isolate, but I see differences where we can now celebrate, right? There's something so awesome about each of us. You know right now we've got differences going on with blacks and whites and racism and politics and countries against countries and wars and families, there's a lot of crazy things that are going on. But honestly, when we use our differences to celebrate, versus our differences to isolate, I think this world would be a better place. So, what questions do you need to ask and what questions do you need to answer? Maybe you're an adult, right? And you're working with an amazing student if they are coming to grips with who they are and their awesomeness and you have to say, "You know what, I don't know." Maybe you are a counselor and you're working with a parent or family, and sometimes you may not know what to say or how to say it, but guess what? When we ask and when we answer, we have in-depth conversations, we'll definitely understand just how awesome we are.

Here is the next thing -- is to accept. Right now, acceptance is so important, right? I have to accept that I'm the oldest person in my family, I went through a divorce and I'm a single man now. I have to accept that I'm a full-time entrepreneur. I have to accept that we are doing a virtual conference through the camera. I've had to accept that and as individuals, as leaders, as students, as parents, as counselors, as teachers -- what is it that you have to accept -- number four, accept, so number five, you can advance? You have an assignment that's only designed for you to do. Yes, you are unique in your assignment. Number two, you have to acknowledge just how awesome you are. And in doing that, you're going to have to ask some questions and answer some questions. But when you accept just how awesome you are, and those that are around you are, we can now all advance.

You see, I'm a big tennis fan. I love Venus and Serena Williams. I love Federer and Nadal, and even Andre Agassi. During a tennis match, right? They have points like 30 love and 60 love and deuces, right? So there's a point in the match when things are tied and you have one person, you know, they go up by one point, and they will call that, "Hey, this is an advantage point." And when a person scores and wins the next ball, they now have won the match.

What's your advantage point? What skills do you have, what gifts do you have, what abilities do you have that can make your city, your state, this country, and this world a better place? You know, I've come to learn that my advantage point is sharing my story. I've had to learn that my advantage point is being able to think critically, to be able to think creatively. I've learned that my advantage point is to be able to speak and to create videos like this and write books and to help people. That's my advantage point. As a student, as a young person, what's your advantage point? Maybe you have an amazing talent, maybe you can draw, right? And you have a way of seeing things that the entire world needs to see. Maybe you are a great speaker or orator, or maybe you're a great singer, right? And your advantage point needs to be given to the world so people can hear it. Maybe you are a counselor, a teacher, a parent and you have the advantage point of serving and loving. You know what? The more you serve, the more you love, you give others the advantage. And now we all can have our advantage point. Listen, I'm Determined community, you are absolutely awesome, but I want to leave you with this: You have an assignment that's meant only for you. When you acknowledge just how awesome, unique, gifted, blessed, and favored you are -- when you spend the time asking the right questions and answering maybe those hard questions, we can all accept just how amazing we are. And when we do that, we can cause this world to advance, and we all can walk out our advantage point. Hey, I'm Kantis Simmons, the coolest guy with 7.25 fingers. And remember this, I'm Determined: you have the advantage point. I'll talk to you soon. Bye-bye.