

Dear President Volnick, Interim Provost Hawkins, faculty, staff, and students

I am honored to speak to you today as this year's recipient of the Distinguished Teach of the Year. I express my sincerest thanks to the student selection committee at both the college and university levels for this award as well as my amazing colleagues in the College of Social Work and Criminal Justice. It is an honor and privilege to work beside you all every day. Lastly, and to me most importantly, to my wife Vanessa and daughter Meghan. You both are my champions who inspire me daily more than you will ever know. I love you both!

To be honest with you...I find myself questioning what it is about me that has gotten me to this point. There is one thing I keep coming back to...perhaps all the dad jokes I tell in class have finally paid off. If you all need one today just let me know [SHOW BOOK]. Like I tell my students I take all laughs...with me...at me...it all counts. I am no one special. I know in my heart that all the other finalists for this award are just as worthy. So, I congratulate each of you as well as all the honorees at today's convocation. In preparing this speech I kept thinking about what one of the famous rat pack members, Sammy Davis, Jr., [I know some of you know who this is and for others Google him] once said, "I gotta be me." My approach to all my students and my challenge to you all today is to consider what it

takes to be a champion for others and the importance of having compassion in today's world.

As you have spent your time at FAU and think of your time beyond, you are undoubtedly filled with hopes and dreams for the future. You are eager to make a difference, to leave your mark on the world, and to achieve great things. And that is wonderful. But as you pursue your goals, I urge you to remember that being a champion for others is just as important as achieving your own success. I ask you now...to take a moment...reflect on that person or persons who have been a champion for you in your life and in what way.

When I ponder what does it mean to be a champion for others? It means being a leader, a role model, and a source of inspiration for those around you. It means using your talents and your voice to lift up others, to advocate for those who are marginalized or voiceless, and to create positive change in the world. When I was in high school, I was not the best student, in fact, I spent more time out of school than in. When I was nearing graduation my father, who is not a college educated person, told me he would pay for one semester but if I went and did a choice word my dad used around I could go flip hamburgers at McDonald's. Now there is nothing wrong with that, however, it is not the path I wanted to take. In this

moment, my father, in his own way became a champion for me. By lighting a fire under me.

It also means having compassion - for yourself and for others. Compassion is the ability to feel empathy for someone else's struggles, to offer kindness and support, and to treat others with respect and dignity. In a world that can often feel cold and uncaring, compassion is a powerful force for good. When my mother died a little over a year ago the amount of compassion I received from my colleagues and students is indescribable. Emails, texts, and phone calls were a part of what helped move through this dark moment in my life.

So, how can you be a champion for others and practice compassion in your daily life? Here are a few ideas:

1. Volunteer your time and talents to organizations that serve others.

Whether it's a local charity, a community service project, or a campus organization, there are countless opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others. Some of the best time I have spent since being at FAU is working with and mentoring students, who, like me, were once lost making that transition from high school to college. Stay connected to FAU and volunteer your times and talents by being a champion for others. I

guess you can call this paying it forward for those who may have been champions for you during your tenure at FAU.

2. Listen actively to those around you. Often, all someone needs is a listening ear and a compassionate heart. By taking the time to really listen and show that you care, you can make a big difference in someone's life. Notice I said active listen...just like you all are doing today...or so I hope. [Laugh]. I take great pride in following up with my students when they share something with me that is important to them. Often, it quite baffles them that I remember and show interest sometime later.
3. Speak up for what you believe in. Whether it's advocating for social justice or any other cause you feel passionate about, your voice and your actions can make a difference. Make sure, however, you have your facts before going into it. Our opinions are fine but having the facts in hand makes it difficult to question your passion.
4. Practice self-compassion. Remember that you are not perfect, and that's okay. Treat yourself with kindness and understanding, and don't be too hard on yourself when you make mistakes. This is a tough one. Sometimes we may feel that we have to be here instead of here or doing this instead of this. I promise you your struggles are going to be waiting for you day by

day. However, finding a way to have self-compassion may, just may, make it a little easier.

As you go out into the world, I encourage you to be a champion for others and to practice compassion in all that you do. Remember that your success is not just about what you achieve for yourself, but also about what you do to lift those around you. With compassion and determination, you can create a brighter future for us all.

Thank you.