

2011 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

Deborah L. Floyd, Ed.D.
Professor of Educational Leadership
College of Education

BELIEVE

Believe in yourself. Surround yourself by those who believe in you. Believe in others.

Thank you, Provost Alperin. Trustee Stilley, President Saunders, Vice Presidents, Deans, Professors, honored students and faculty, family, friends and colleagues. We are fortunate today to witness the “*best of the best*” at Florida Atlantic University. Please join me in another well deserved round of applause for all the honorees.

Thank you for this award, which I accept on behalf of all the great teachers at FAU and the special teachers and mentors who **believed** in me, especially when I did not **believe** in myself. To Dr. Anne E. Mulder, who has mentored and **believed** in me for over 20 years, thank you for modeling the way. You have been, and continue to be, the greatest teacher I have had the privilege to know. To the University and College Distinguished Teacher of the Year Committees, I applaud your professionalism and thank you for this honor. And, most importantly, to current and former students who have given me the privilege of helping to guide your learning journey. You - my students and graduates - are the reason I am here.

My message today is simple. **Believe. Believe** in yourself. Surround yourself with people who **believe** in you. **Believe** in others. Today’s winners illustrate the power of **believing**.

Think about famous people who have overcome adversity to be successful. Like J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series. Perhaps you know about her “rags to riches” story. She once said that seven years after her university graduation she was the biggest failure she knew. She progressed from living on benefits while raising a child on her own as she struggled through rejection, a divorce and depression to being a successful author with an estimated worth of one billion dollars. Not bad for an English major, eh? What happened? She knew she wanted to be a writer. When life gave her lemons she made lemonade. She picked herself up, dusted herself off, and kept pursuing her dream. (*And, she went to graduate school!*) She credits some of her success to Sean

Harris, her best friend, who **believed** in her... and told her so over and over again... especially as she faced rejection on a number of fronts.

Do we have any Shaquille O'Neal fans here? Most of us don't think that anyone leaving Louisiana State University in 1992 during his junior year for a 40 million dollar contract with the NBA Orlando Magic is anything short of major league success! But, did you know that Shaq made a promise to his mother, Lucille, that he would finish his college education? He honored his promise. Six years later Shaq finished his last term paper in geology, missed a game with the Lakers and attended his LSU baccalaureate degree graduation. Shaq demonstrated that winners make, and keep, promises to others who **believe** in them, especially promises to their mothers! Many of our award winners have their own stories about their journey resulting in a seat of honor today. This room is full of stories about overcoming adversity and honoring promises to ourselves...and to those who **believe in us** and continue to **believe**.

I teach graduate students in the Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology – Higher Education Leadership Program. Some of my students and graduates are in the audience today. Many have overcome adversity; almost all work full-time jobs, lead complex lives, have families and go to classes on weekends and at night. They have made, and are making, sacrifices. All illustrate the **power of believing**. One graduate flew in this morning on a Delta red-eye from her job as a dean of students in Seattle, Washington - Dr. Deborah Casey. Dr. Casey is my first doctoral graduate. She worked full time, raised a daughter as a single parent and completed her Ph.D. in record time. She will receive our Department's Alumni of the Year Award Friday. Will Dr. Casey please rise? Will all of my current students and graduates here today please stand and be recognized? I am proud of you all!

Successful higher education depends on collaborative teamwork. Every successful graduate has benefited from a **community of believers** who teach core courses, mentor students and guide scholarship and research. Indeed, it takes a **community of believers** - dedicated faculty, supportive administrators and caring support staff working together to educate professionals in our field of educational leadership. To my colleagues, thank you for being here. And thank you for your tireless dedication to our students.

It is tradition for this award winner to speak about a philosophy of teaching. As you now know, **believing** is at the core of my philosophy. Mentoring students outside the classroom is a key to student success and an important act of **believing**. While classroom learning experiences are essential to success, research strongly supports the value of out-of-class engagement and faculty mentoring. Graduates best remember

faculty who **believed** in them and never gave up on them. They perform better in the classroom and are less likely to drop out when they know faculty **believe** in them and want them to succeed.

Recently, one of my doctoral students came to me with news that he may have to drop out of the program. He works full time as a community college administrator and was caring for his mother who was dying of cancer. He is an only child. He needed one course that I teach; a course offered only every other year. My advisees know that one of my rules is to take the classes when they are offered on our rotation. But what happens when life gets in the way of this rule? In this case, the answer was simple. *Break the rule!* Accommodations were made. His mother passed away the third week of the class. The fourth week this brilliant student joined our Saturday class with compassionate student colleagues embracing his return. We were sad for his loss, but joyful he did not quit. Life commitments, like taking care of our families, are often important parts of most students' journey. **Believing** in students means we often need to be flexible professors and mentors.

Family clearly plays an important role in ensuring students' success. Several years ago one of my doctoral students, who was also a high-ranking university administrator, was struggling. She aced the coursework, did very well on the comps exam, but when the loneliness of dissertation writing came along...well, she stalled. Her writing was good. Her study was solid. But, whether it was indecisiveness, fear of completion or another reason...she could not write the defensible dissertation. It was time for an intervention! One Sunday morning, I hosted a small beach brunch of recent graduates and a few dissertation-stage advisees. We celebrated those who had completed the dissertation journey and encouraged those coming behind. I asked this stalled student's husband to join me for a private confrontation. "We **believe** in you and want you to **finish** this dissertation!" united we exclaimed. Now she calls this the "*sandwich effect*." Her hubby was on one side and professor on the other... delivering an ultimatum - *finish the dissertation before January 1st*. The absolute deadline was set - the finish line. So over the holiday she wrote long hours...and, finally, just before the post office closed on New Year's Eve the two of them ceremonially placed the dissertation in the mail. A time for a toast! So what did the New Year bring? I am pleased to say that this was, indeed, her best work. It was scholarly, contributed new knowledge and was well written. She defended her dissertation a month later and graduated that semester. Ah, the power of the "*sandwich effect*"... and **believing!**

Almost all of my students, especially doctoral students, want to quit at some time during the program...together, effective faculty, mentors, friends and family **just say "NO"**. **We believe**...and we help our students figure out how to maneuver the

demands of evening and Saturday classes, write scholarly papers while working full time during the week, juggle family relationships including new babies, illnesses, marital challenges and much more.

Students, when you think you cannot write one more paper, take one more test or maneuver one more university administrative rule, know that **WE BELIEVE IN YOU. YOU CAN DO IT. YOU WILL DO IT. WE WILL SUPPORT YOU AS YOU DO IT.**

And finally, our work does not end with graduation, as my professorial colleagues in the audience know very well. I recall many phone calls from graduates, most of whom are college and university administrators, asking "*what should I do?*" about numerous administrative and leadership challenges. They remember we **believed** in them as students; they know we **believe** in them as graduates; and we, as faculty, **believe** always because ours is a lifetime commitment.

Thank you.

Go Owls! ☺
