Transcript:

The wisest person I ever met in my life, a third-grade dropout. Wisest and dropout in the same sentence is rather oxymoronic, like jumbo shrimp. Like Fun Run, ain’t nothing fun about it, like Microsoft Works. You all don’t hear me. I used to say like country music, but I’ve lived in Texas so long, I love country music now. I hunt. I fish. I have cowboy boots and cowboy … You all, I’m a blackneck redneck. Do you hear what I’m saying to you? No longer oxymoronic for me to say country music, and it’s not oxymoronic for me to say third grade and dropout.

That third grade dropout, the wisest person I ever met in my life, who taught me to combine knowledge and wisdom to make an impact, was my father, a simple cook, wisest man I ever met in my life, just a simple cook, left school in the third grade to help out on the family farm, but just because he left school doesn’t mean his education stopped. Mark Twain once said, “I’ve never allowed my schooling to get in the way of my education.” My father taught himself how to read, taught himself how to write, decided in the midst of Jim Crowism, as America was breathing the last gasp of the Civil War, my father decided he was going to stand and be a man, not a black man, not a brown man, not a white man, but a man. He literally challenged himself to be the best that he could all the days of his life.

I have four degrees. My brother is a judge. We’re not the smartest ones in our family. It’s a third grade dropout daddy, a third grade dropout daddy who was quoting Michelangelo, saying to us boys, “I won’t have a problem if you aim high and miss, but I’m gonna have a real issue if you aim low and hit.” A country mother quoting Henry Ford, saying, “If you think you can or if you think you can’t, you’re right.” I learned that from a third grade drop. Simple lessons, lessons like these. “Son, you’d rather be an hour early than a minute late.” We never knew what time it was at my house because the clocks were always ahead. My mother said, for nearly 30 years, my father left the house at 3:45 in the morning, one day, she asked him, “Why, Daddy?” He said, “Maybe one of my boys will catch me in the act of excellence.”

I want to share a few things with you. Aristotle said, “You are what you repeatedly do.” Therefore, excellence ought to be a habit, not an act. Don’t ever forget that. I know you’re tough. I know you’re seaworthy, but always remember to be kind, always. Don’t ever forget that. Never embarrass Mama. Mm-hmm (affirmative). If Mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. If Daddy ain’t happy, don’t nobody care, but I’m going to tell you.

Next lesson, lesson from a cook over there in the galley. “Son, make sure your servant’s towel is bigger than your ego.” I want to remind you cadets of something as you graduate. Ego is the anesthesia that deadens the pain of stupidity. You all might have a relative in mind you want to send that to. Let me say it again. Ego is the anesthesia that deadens the pain of stupidity. Pride is the burden of a foolish person.

John Wooden coached basketball at UCLA for a living, but his calling was to impact people, and with all those national championships, guess what he was found doing in the middle of the week? Going into the cupboard, grabbing a broom and sweeping his own gym floor. You want to make an impact? Find your broom. Every day of your life, you find your broom. You grow your influence that way. That way, you’re attracting people so that you can impact them.

Final lesson. “Son, if you’re going to do a job, do it right.” I’ve always been told how average I can be, always been criticized about being average, but I want to tell you something. I stand here before you before all of these people, not listening to those words, but telling myself every single day to shoot for the stars, to be the best that I can be. Good enough isn’t good enough if it can be better, and better isn’t good enough if it can be best.

Let me close with a very personal story that I think will bring all this into focus. Wisdom will come to you in the unlikeliest of sources, a lot of times through failure. When you hit rock bottom, remember this. While you’re struggling, rock bottom can also be a great foundation on which to build and on which to grow. I’m not worried that you’ll be successful. I’m worried that you won’t fail from time to time. The person that gets up off the canvas and keeps growing, that’s the person that will continue to grow their influence.

Back in the ’70s, to help me make this point, let me introduce you to someone. I met the finest woman I’d ever met in my life. Mm-hmm (affirmative). Back in my day, we’d have called her a brick house. This woman was the finest woman I’d ever seen in my life. There was just one little problem. Back then, ladies didn’t like big old linemen. The Blind Side hadn’t come out yet. They liked quarterbacks and running back. We’re at this dance, and I find out her name is Trina Williams from Lompoc, California. We’re all dancing and we’re just excited. I decide in the middle of dancing with her that I would ask her for her phone number. Trina was the first … Trina was the only woman in college who gave me her real telephone number.

The next day, we walked to Baskin and Robbins Ice Cream Parlor. My friends couldn’t believe it. This has been 40 years ago, and my friends still can’t believe it. We go on a second date and a third date and a fourth date. Mm-hmm (affirmative). We drive from Chico to Vallejo so that she can meet my parents. My father meets her. My daddy. My hero. He meets her, pulls me to the side and says, “Is she psycho?” Anyway, we go together for a year, two years, three years, four years. By now, Trina’s a senior in college. I’m still a freshman, but I’m working some things out. I’m so glad I graduated in four terms, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan.

Now, it’s time to propose, so I talk to her girlfriends, and it’s California. It’s in the ’70s, so it has to be outside, have to have a candle and you have to some chocolate. Listen, I’m from the hood. I had a bottle of Boone’s Farm wine. That’s what I had. She said, “Yes.” That was the key. I married the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen in my … You all ever been to a wedding and even before the wedding starts, you hear this? “How in the world?” It was coming from my side of the family. We get married. We have a few children. Our lives are great.

One day, Trina finds a lump in her left breast. Breast cancer. Six years after that diagnosis, me and my two little boys walked up to Mommy’s casket and, for two years, my heart didn’t beat. If it wasn’t for my faith in God, I wouldn’t be standing here today. If it wasn’t for those two little boys, there would have been no reason for which to go on. I was completely lost. That was rock bottom. You know what sustained me? The wisdom of a third grade dropout, the wisdom of a simple cook.

We’re at the casket. I’d never seen my dad cry, but this time I saw my dad cry. That was his daughter. Trina was his daughter, not his daughter-in-law, and I’m right behind my father about to see her for the last time on this Earth, and my father shared three words with me that changed my life right there at the casket. It would be the last lesson he would ever teach me. He said, “Son, just stand. You keep standing. You keep stand … No matter how rough the sea, you keep standing, and I’m not talking about just water. You keep standing. No matter what. You don’t give up.” I learned that lesson from a third grade dropout, and as clearly as I’m talking to you today, these were some of her last words to me. She looked me in the eye and she said, “It doesn’t matter to me any longer how long I live. What matters to me most is how I live.”

I ask you all one question, a question that I was asked all my life by a third grade dropout. How you living? How you living? Every day, ask yourself that question. How you living? Here’s what a cook would suggest you to live, this way, that you would not judge, that you would show up early, that you’d be kind, that you make sure that that servant’s towel is huge and used, that if you’re going to do something, you do it the right way. That cook would tell you this, that it’s never wrong to do the right thing, that how you do anything is how you do everything, and in that way, you will grow your influence to make an impact. In that way, you will honor all those who have gone before you who have invested in you. Look in those unlikeliest places for wisdom. Enhance your life every day by seeking that wisdom and asking yourself every night, “How am I living?” May God richly bless you all. Thank you for having me here.

Questions for Class Discussion:

1. What would be your aim high goal for a career?

2. How’s your attitude? Do you think you can or think you can’t?

Follow-up: How can you change your attitude if it is the “I can’t” kind?

3. Have you ever caught someone in the act of excellence? Tell us about that person.

4. Do you have anyone watching you—someone you want to catch you in the act of excellence?

Follow-up: How do you think that person got to the point in which they did everything the right way?

5. Why is it so important to be kind?

Folow-up: Do you consider yourself to be a kind person? Why or why not?

Follow-up: What is one kind act that you can follow through on today?

6. We’ve all done it. Tell us about a time when you embarrassed your mama.

Follow-up: How did that make you feel? Would you go back and change your actions if you could? What steps can you take to keep from doing that again?

7. What does Dr. Rigsby mean by having a large serving towel? Does anyone know what an allusion is? Who or what is Dr. Rigsby referring to?

Answer: an allusion is a reference to another work, a person from history or the present, etc. This allusion is to Jesus and how he washed his disciples’ feet using a large towel.

8. “Ego is the anesthesia that deadens the pain of stupidity.” What does this mean?

Break down: What is anesthesia?

What is ego in this context?

Answer: Being proud or having a big ego (or high opinion of yourself) will keep you from realizing your own ignorance. It will keep you from seeking the wisdom that others can teach you and it will hinder your own growth.

9. What was the significance of the story/example about John Wooden, the basketball coach?

Answer: You must be willing to serve other people to gain the ability to influence/impact them.

10. What does he mean by find your broom? What is your broom right now in this season of your life?

Answer: Your broom is what you can do to serve others so that you can impact them.

11. How does being willing to serve draw people to you?

12. Once people are drawn to you, Dr. Rigsby says, you can make a difference in their lives. Is there someone you can encourage to begin the GED program that you have begun? Make the commitment to talk to them today.

13. Has anyone ever told you that you are average or that you can’t do something? Tell the group about it.

Follow up: Dr. Rigsby always replaced those negative comments with striving to do his best. You can do the same. Is there someone who always responds to your dreams with negativity? Decide today not to listen to them and to replace their negative thoughts with positive ones.

14. What has been the most rock bottom season of your life?

16. Have you ever bounced back from a failure?

17. What lesson can you draw from Dr. Rigsby’s experience of losing his wife?

Answer: To keep standing no matter what happens or has happened.

18. Do you believe that you can become a powerful influence in the lives of your family members and friends—just as Dr. Rigsby’s dad was to him?

19. Dr. Rigsby says, “How you do anything is how you do everything.” What do you think he means by this statement?

Character is made up of what you do and don’t do—over and over again. How you approach even the smallest tasks will impact your character.

20. Do you seek wisdom from others who have more life experience than you?

Follow-up: Are you teachable/coachable? (Can you receive constructive criticism and work on improving your weaknesses?)

21. What was Dr. Rigsby’s dad definition of “being a man”?

Answer: Being someone others could admire and follow. To be a man was to live a life of excellence—not judging, showing kindness, seeking wisdom, and striving to live in a great way each day.

22. How are you really living? Is there anything about your life that you need to change?

23. Why is this speech successful? What choices did he make as a writer that impacted the audience?

Answer: This speech was successful for various reasons: Dr. Rigsby is likeable and personable. He uses humor to begin his speech, and he comes back to it throughout his speech. He is passionate about his father, his wife, his family, and excellence. His quotes are relevant and inspiring. His anecdotes or stories give evidence to his points. He opens up about his wife and her death. His speech relates to all people. His pieces or advice are short and easy to remember.

Assessment:

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Whole Class Discussion Checklist

\_\_\_\_1. Student listened attentively to others.

\_\_\_\_2. Student responded effectively to at least one question.

\_\_\_\_3. Student-created question enriched the class discussion.

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