

The Leadership Opportunity

MERRILL J. BATEMAN

On behalf of the board of trustees and the administration, faculty, and staff, we welcome graduates, family members, and friends to the April 2003 commencement. On this beautiful spring day, the graduates have reached an important milestone on a path that is never ending. Receiving a degree should not signal the end but the beginning of the learning process. It is a marker that indicates you know how to learn.

This is an extraordinary class. Most of today's graduates have participated in research or creative activities wherein they have explored the frontiers of their chosen disciplines. As a consequence, both graduate and undergraduate students have published papers, presented at conferences, or exhibited creative works. The premise for this type of environment that we are creating at Brigham Young University is that the teaching and learning process is most effective when the student is engaged in the creation of knowledge. Participation in research and creative activities brings an intensity often lacking in education.

Acceptance rates for BYU students into graduate programs illustrate the quality of

today's graduates. I learned recently that 94 percent of BYU students applying for dental school were accepted. Acceptance rates for BYU students applying for medical, law, business, and other graduate programs are 30 to 40 percent above the national norms. During the current academic year, BYU students placed first or second in a number of national or international competitions in such fields as computer science, mathematics, engineering, music, journalism, visual arts, technology, political science, and teacher education.

The quality of BYU students is becoming so well known that presidents of leading institutions have called in recent months enquiring how their universities could become more involved with BYU and how they could attract more BYU students into their graduate programs.

For the second consecutive academic year, the number of graduates will exceed 9,300.

Merrill J. Bateman was president of Brigham Young University when this commencement address was given on 24 April 2003.

That is 1,800 more than the number of graduates one decade ago, making this a new high in terms of the number of students graduating. The 9,300 figure is significant because it represents one-third of the entire student body leaving us this year. Today's students are more determined to complete their studies and are taking more credits per semester. Consequently, the time to graduation has dropped 1.2 semesters in the last few years.

The youngest graduate today is 19 years old—a graduate in accounting. The oldest is 91—Brother C. Laird Snelgrove. Elder Ballard and I had the honor of presenting him his degree in a special ceremony shortly before his death a few weeks ago. BYU's Independent Study program allowed him to fulfill a dream that he had had for more than 60 years. This program has also helped a number of others graduating today to complete their education.

With this April graduation, more than 100 bachelor of general studies students have received degrees since the inception of the program just four years ago, and there are now 1,300 students in the program. This program allows students to complete a degree online if they have had 30 or more hours on campus. Among that group today are two mothers who will join a son and a daughter in receiving their degrees. Both Rachel Creswell and Linda Tilton will graduate today—a goal they set more than 30 years ago. Would you both please stand and be recognized. Young women often leave here before they have finished their degrees, instead raising families and helping their husbands to graduate. Of the 1,300 in the bachelor of general studies program, 87 percent are women who want to complete their degrees.

Today's degree recipients come from all 50 states, one U.S. territory, and 52 foreign countries. Currently there are students on campus from more than 120 countries and all 50 states.

Today Sister Bateman and I graduate with you. We are part of the Class of 2003. This occasion provides me with the opportunity to issue

a final presidential challenge. It is my firm conviction that your presence at Brigham Young University is not by happenstance. I believe you are part of the prophet Isaiah's vision in which he saw "many people . . . go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob" to be taught "of his ways" and to learn how to "walk in his paths" (Isaiah 2:3). You have come here to be educated in both mind and spirit. The buildings and the campus are sacred; they have been dedicated to the God of Jacob, and I believe they are part of His house.

I believe this because a form of Isaiah's vision was given to three members of the BYU community during its earliest days—to Karl Maeser, the early architect and president; to Alfred Kelly, a student; and to Sidney Sperry, a faculty member. Each saw in a dream hundreds of buildings before those buildings had existed and thousands of students gathered from many nations, even though the students in their day were few in number and from the local community. For each of these men, the dream gave them the courage to hold on through difficult times.

Brothers and sisters, you are not here by accident. You have been seen in vision many times. And you have been provided an extraordinary education largely at Church expense. Thus, what is your responsibility as you leave? First, you know the truth. In addition to the things of the earth, you have been taught eternal principles. The only way that "swords [will be turned] into plowshares, and . . . spears into pruning hooks" is through your living and sharing these truths (Isaiah 2:4). Your leadership is needed in this world if peace is to be realized.

To be a leader, you must be true to the principles taught. There are absolutes. There are "rights" and "wrongs." There is a God to whom we will ultimately answer. If we are to be leaders in our communities, we must be honest, fair, respectful of others, and accountable for our actions.

There is a principle of leadership that I would like you to remember. It is the following: "If you take care of the little things, the big things will take care of themselves." The world has turned this principle upside down. There are many who believe that it is okay to cheat in the little things. It is okay to commit "a little sin," to "lie a little, take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; . . . for tomorrow we die" (2 Nephi 28:8). The problem is that cheating in the little things leads to cheating in the big ones. The demise of large corporations in recent years began with small acts of dishonesty that led to larger and larger ones.

Please remember this principle as you leave the university: "If you take care of the little things, the big things will take care of themselves."

Sister Bateman and I express our love and appreciation for seven wonderful years. It took us longer to graduate than most of you. It is our prayer that you will be true to the spiritual foundations laid for you at this remarkable institution and that you will accept the challenge of becoming leaders in your communities. We ask our Heavenly Father's blessings on you and extend our love to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.