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Commencement Address to CCV
June 2, 2018

Good afternoon. It is truly an honor to be here with you today– congratulations to the more than 500 members of the 2018 Community College of Vermont graduating class.

I have to tell you, when I was first asked to speak today, I was hesitant. I felt inadequate to address such a fine group of men and women, many of whom have had to tackle many more obstacles than I did to earn a college diploma.

I was very fortunate to have two parents who supported me financially and emotionally through college. I didn't have a child or a full-time job in college. I didn't have to overcome physical or cultural barriers. I haven't been a victim of racism and I've had family and mentors who had my back. And even with all that luck, it still wasn't easy to earn my college degree or find professional success – because there simply is no easy path to success. Every one of you has overcome challenges in your lives to be here today.

The road each of us took to get here, to be here at this moment shapes us – but it doesn't define us.

You worked hard to get here and you will work hard after you move on from here. No matter what you do after today, you have earned a degree that will open doors for you throughout your life. And, you will go on to open doors for others so that they too can realize their dreams.

I want to share the story of an exceptional woman who opened a whole lot of doors. This is the story of my Mother, Linda Maily. It begins in Jersey City, New Jersey. Linda had always dreamed of going to college – in high school she was in the “college prep” program, but, in her words, her family life was “*not terrific*”. They lived in poverty, her Father struggled with alcohol, and in 1962 he left the family. Her mother had her own mental health issues, so, at the age of 15, Linda left school to support her mother, her sister and herself. Thankfully, she had learned how to type in high school, so she was able to work, but her dream of going to college drifted away. As she says, “life happened.”

By the time Linda was 20, she had nursed her Mother, watched her die of cancer, raised her younger sister, been married and divorced, and had two little boys ages 3 and 1.

Fast forward to 1972 – Linda was 24. She'd met a great guy named Tim and they moved with those two little boys to Guilford, Vermont. During the first week of January, Linda was in the small home they rented awaiting the birth of her next child, when a young man came to the door talking about a new college that was being established. He asked Linda if she had ever thought about attending college. She told him that she had

always dreamed of college, but she only had a GED and she didn't think that was enough. And there was certainly no way she could afford it!

This man was John Turner, coordinator of the Brattleboro CCV office. He was doing some serious grassroots outreach! John told my Mother that this new college was going to be offering two courses in the Brattleboro area in February – intro to psychology and Kundalini Yoga. It was the seventies after all! Courses were free, there was no campus and the teachers were professionals in their field. Linda signed up for intro to psych and began her academic journey – just three weeks after I was born.

She spent the next three years attending CCV classes, and had the privilege of being taught and enlightened by people who really cared about her growth and supported her throughout her tenure at CCV. During that time, CCV was formally accepted into the Vermont State Colleges system and began to offer an associate's degree in human services, administrative services and general studies. This was the degree Linda worked on, and it was competency based. Linda loved her education at CCV. As she says: "I knew the first moment of the first class, I was where I needed to be!"

From that associate's degree, Linda kept going. CCV connected her to Wyndham College, where she received her BA in counseling/psychology/education in 1975, and then was awarded her Master of Education in 1981. She spent the rest of her career in education- as a teacher, as a high risk youth counselor, an assistant high school principal, a school improvement facilitator and as the juvenile justice education specialist for Florida State University.

None of this would have happened without CCV or the dream of Phil Hoff and Peter Smith and the other "radical leaders" who believed in access to quality education for all. But, most importantly, it would never have happened without the determination, perseverance and hard work of Linda Mailly.

My Mother made a rich and rewarding career out of something that, before John Turner & CCV knocked on her door, was just a dream that had drifted away because "life happened." But the opportunity came back – and she seized it. Linda was able to start a new chapter to her story – and then another and another. Through her hard work and the high quality education that Community College of Vermont provided her, she has been able to impact so many lives around her, including my own. All because my Mother made the decision in January of 1972 to open that door.

Our journeys are not easy. Every one of us here today had to work hard and start new chapters to get here.

But, like my Mother when she enrolled in her first class, and just like my husband John and I when we started our small business 16 years ago, each and every one of you made the decision to bet on yourselves. And, although your paths are all different, you chose to work hard, to keep working and to open every door.

So today, I feel incredibly honored to be here to celebrate your accomplishments with you. Whether you are going straight to a job or continuing your education – or both! – you all have the tools you need to improve your own lives and to impact the lives of others around you.

As we continue our journey through life together, let's always remember to support others so they, too, can help realize their dreams.

Remember that only you can define a successful future for yourself. We don't all want to be CEO's, we don't all need to invent something or manage hedge funds. Or, since we are in Vermont, we don't all need to be craft cheesemakers (or brewers). For many of us, success is the ability to have a good job that gives us the ability to support our families. Success can be defined by finding our place and finding happiness in this world.

Remember that we can't change the world alone. We make the world a better place by opening doors and having a positive impact on the people around us, just like Linda.

All of you are already changing the future. Most of you don't know how yet, just like my Mother didn't know that HER choices were going to help me. But she opened the door when someone knocked and that's part of what put me at this podium today.

I proudly recognize the grit and determination of every graduate here today. You have all opened the door to a life of learning, personal success and impact for others. Now, for all of the single and working parents out there, let's put our hands together. For all of our veterans. For everyone who has survived assault. For everyone who has been victim to prejudice or hate. For everyone who has struggled with addiction. For everyone whose had to look at a bill pile that's bigger than their bank balance. For everyone who ever felt like giving up, but didn't...

CCV Graduates, I congratulate you and I wish you success on your path. Knock on doors and open them, always start new chapters and enjoy the journey.