



Christine Brennan  
Commencement Speaker and Honorary Degree Recipient

A native of Toledo, Ohio, Christine Brennan is a USA Today sports columnist, author of seven books, and a television sports commentator. She is a leading voice on the Olympics, women's sports and other sports issues.

Brennan's column in USA Today makes her the most widely-read female sports columnist in the nation. Her sports memoir, *Best Seat in the House: A Father, A Daughter, A Journey Through Sports*, is the first father-daughter memoir written by a sports writer.

Brennan is an on-air commentator for ABC News and ESPN and has reported for the networks from the Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Sydney, Athens and Beijing and the Winter Olympics in Nagano, Salt Lake City and Torino. Brennan also is a commentator on NPR's Morning Edition.

In 2001 and 2003, she was named one of the nation's top 10 sports columnists by the Associated

Christine Brennan, UT speech, Dec. 20, 2008

Thank yous: NAMES

What an honor it is to be here on this day, with you.

This is a day you will remember forever, the day you left the friendly confines of academia -- within which you've spent about 80 percent of your young lives -- to begin your wonderful journey through what is commonly known as the rest of your life. Just as you have for the past 16-17 years, you'll continue to receive a lot of advice. Mostly from your parents. Or people your parents' age. Like me.

Life lessons come in many ways, in the words of Winston Churchill and Teddy Roosevelt and Maya Angelou -- and sometimes, in the words of someone almost all of you have never heard of, nor will ever meet.

I must apologize to all the English professors out there, because this piece of advice is not grammatically correct. I realize that can be a bit of a jolt -- a commencement address with a sentence that would receive an F in probably every classroom on this beautiful campus.

Here goes:

"This ain't no dress rehearsal."

That's it. "This ain't no dress rehearsal."

It comes from my late father -- if he told me this once, he mentioned it 100 times.

EXPLAIN -- What this means: It's that this is your one shot at life. This isn't the practice for the next time. This is it. How you treat people. What you do to help others. How your life affects so many other lives, the great line from *It's a Wonderful Life* -- a tip: rent the movie if you've never seen it. It's a dinosaur -- black and white -- but it tells you everything you need to know about living a good life -- a primer, a road map...

This is your time to walk on this earth -- your only time.

Dad -- child of the Depression...on South Side of Chicago, age 8, sell magazines and newspapers to put food on table. Only one year of college...moved to Toledo, across the street, actually, right here in Old Orchard...made his life a great success story selling fork lift trucks. Nothing really fancy or exciting...heavy equipment, the lifeblood of our region...

He went from nothing...to everything...and it all happened right here, in this neighborhood. Yet always gave credit not to himself, but to the greatest country on earth, the USA, for making such dreams possible.

That's not entirely true. Like my father, who didn't have the education you have, you are on the launching pad today...the launching pad to...something. From here on out, it's all what you make of it.

I once saw a quote when I was working as a summer teller at the old Toledo Trust bank downtown after I graduated from high school:

"What you do today is important because you are exchanging a day of your life for it."

Sometimes, there is a notion that whatever we're doing in our daily lives isn't that important. We're always looking ahead. We hear about working for the weekend, about Mon-Fri being just the prelude for REALLY living on Sat.-Sun, doing what you want to do then, as if Mon-Fri. doesn't matter.

I encourage you to ignore that thought. And I encourage you to dig deep down inside, to find out what you are really passionate about, and turn that, if possible, into a part of your life -- in fact, turning your avocation into your vocation, turning your life's passion, if you can, into your life's work.

To explain this, I'll tell you just a little bit about what happened to me:

I was a girl who loved sports well before girls were supposed to love sports. Growing up in Old Orchard in the 1960s and 1970s, when girls were supposed to play with dolls, not play baseball with the boys. Play dress up, not wear football helmets. Can you guess which I chose? And my father and mother, well before their time, said it was okay -- more than okay, they encouraged me.

My childhood was shaped by this university and its sports teams. When I was 5, 6 years old, I could see the glow of the lights from the Glass Bowl from our front yard on Barrington. My father started taking me to Rocket games soon after, and I became the biggest little Rocket fan there was. My love for the T.U. Rockets -- we called the school T.U. back then, not U.T. -- reached a crescendo from 1969-71, when quarterback Chuck Ealey led the team to a 35-0 record, and we had season tickets to witness it all. For my Christmas present in 1971, at the age of 13, my father took me to the Tangerine Bowl in Orlando, Fla., to see that 35th victory. I had tears in my eyes at the end of that game,

This university played another important role in my childhood. We neighborhood kids grew up playing baseball and football -- any unorganized sport, really -- on Goddard Field. On long summer days, we told time by the clock tower on University Hall. When the clock hit 6 p.m., we dashed home to dinner. We were back playing on the field again by the time the hands reached 7 p.m.

I also loved writing and kept a diary every day for years, all through my high school and college days. Couldn't wait for the newspaper to arrive at the doorstep, to pore over the box scores and read reports of the previous night's games.

So let's see: sports and writing...sports and writing...and yet, because I had no role models, never read a woman's sports bylines because women didn't yet write sports, never saw a woman on TV reporting sports -- I didn't think women did this. I didn't think there was a place in that world for me. I thought I'd become a journalist, write about politics...that was the extent of it.

It would have sounded more logical for me to say I wanted to walk on the moon than to say I wanted to be a sportswriter.

Being a sportswriter: That drew the laughter. Saying, as a girl, that I wanted to write sports. That was funny to people.

Walking on the moon would have been more normal -- not that that would have been very normal, either. But that gives you a picture of the time and place in which I grew up.

Perhaps you have a love, a passion, that people have smiled about -- or laughed at. A love of a particular kind of music...art...thinking about a web site you'd like to create someday, a business of your dreams...a city you'd like to move to...something you perhaps have told no one else...just your hopes and dreams...

That was the case with me. I've met dozens of women who have told me they were like me...would have loved to get into sports...but did not for some reason.

Me, I followed my heart. And I'll let you in on a little secret. I had what I have since realized is a wonderful combination of two qualities that no one ever puts together -- but they do work together -- big time.

Naivete. And gumption.

Being just clueless enough to not know you're NOT supposed to be able to do something, to not listen to the background noise of naysayers and critics -- and, oh, believe me, they're out there -- telling you that you cannot do something -- to press full

steam ahead with an innocence bordering on the ridiculous -- because of what was inside of me, because of what I loved.

I've been asked hundreds of times about all the obstacles thrown in my path as I became a sports journalist, one of the first women in that field, about going into men's locker rooms to interview athletes after games, about all the difficult times. And you know something, I don't remember those bad times, because I chose to ignore them, and -- with gumption -- go full steam ahead.

If someone didn't like me, I didn't care. If you want something bad enough -- the background noise doesn't matter. Your priorities are set. If someone thought I shouldn't be in the locker room, I knew the rules and I knew I was allowed, and nothing was going to stop me from following my dreams.

My Dad's advice helped in this area too. When I was assigned -- at the age of 22, right out of college, Northwestern, sorry, not UT, in my case -- to go into my first men's locker room -- the Minnesota Vikings' locker room during a preseason NFL game at the Orange Bowl -- I called home to Toledo to ask my Dad for his advice.

He said, simply: "Honey, keep eye contact at all times."

So when people ask me: what do you see in those 1,000 locker rooms I've been in over the past 26 years, I simply say:

The whites of their eyes.

That's my story and I'm sticking with it.

So how does this pertain to you, sitting here, about to step out of this building and into that "brave new world?"

In some ways, your world is so, well, easy to navigate. You can get so much of what you want at the tip of your fingertips, through your computer. You can research papers on line -- when I was your age, I was spending hours scouring shelves in libraries at the University of Toledo and Northwestern.

Yet, the irony is, what will make you most successful will not be what you find on your computer, blackberry or cell phone. It might make life a little easier, but it won't make you any more successful.

The secret to your success in whatever you do will come the same way it came to graduates of the Class of 1947, 1957, 1967, 1977 -- none of whom had computers or blackberrys or cell phones when they were in college.

Through hard work.

Hard work...dedication to the task...doing more than the person sitting beside you...basically -- wanting it more.

What is hard work? Sending out 100 e-mails -- with resumes attached -- to prospective employers when all your friends are sending out maybe 10...or at most, 25.

Staying up all night, pulling an all-nighter when everyone else is asleep, to make sure the resume and cover letter are perfect.

Taking the time to send thank you notes -- handwritten notes mean more than an e-mail, even now. Never forgetting to say thanks, please...

Old school, I know. But it works, ladies and gentlemen. It works. The world is one big people business. That's the common denominator -- how you treat other people.

It's the little things that lead to living an exemplary life. So much of what we see on TV or hear on the radio tells you not to do that, to slack off, to take it easy, to break the rules. Trust me, that doesn't work. Treating people right, giving your time to charity, doing things for others, doing the right thing, going the extra mile -- that works.

As someone once said, the people you see on the way up are the people you'll see on the way down -- so treat 'em right.

As you can see, it's really simple and easy. You've been told this, taught the skills, learned the lessons. The advice isn't complicated.

In my case, the advice I live by didn't come from a president of the U.S., a prime minister, a world-famous writer and poet.

It came from a teller's cage an hour and a half northwest of this university, 30 years ago.

"What you do today is important because you are exchanging a day of your life for it."

And it came from a fork-lift truck dealer in Toledo, who happened to think a girl growing up in the 1960s could do anything she wanted to do.

Do good deeds, follow your heart, find a worthwhile task. Make your life matter.

