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## Andrew M. Mead, 2001 UMaine Commencement Address

Andrew M. Mead

*Chief Justice of Maine Superior Court*

University of Maine, Division of Marketing and Communications

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## University of Maine News

**Andrew M. Mead,**  
**Chief Justice of the Maine Superior Court**  
Commencement Address  
University of Maine  
Orono, Maine  
May 19, 2001

President Hoff, Provost Kennedy, Trustees, distinguished faculty and staff of the University of Maine, honored guests, parents, partners, friends and graduating students, the Class of 2001. Greetings ! And hearty congratulations to the graduating students. You have accomplished something wonderful, and I thank you for the opportunity to share this most happy moment with you.

These are days of celebration and goodbyes, packing and moving on, and deciding what to take with you and what to leave behind.

Rest assured that you will take this extraordinary institution with you in your heart. It will continue to be a source of inspiration and happy memories for all your days.

As I was organizing my thoughts for this address here today, my wife and two teenage children were quite... shall we say... "helpful"... in sharing their suggestions and critiquing my early drafts. As a result, several drafts were abandoned completely at the persistent urging of my helpful family members.

My daughter found my early drafts way too stuffy and preachy.

My immediate response was, "Hey, I'm 50 years old. I'm a judge. People expect me to be stuffy and preachy !" - despite the fact that I really am not stuffy or preachy - at least not in my own humble opinion. But the draft went in the dustbin anyway.

My son suggested using a musical backdrop - kind of a rap groove going - with me doing a voice-over. Sort a of judicial hip-hop number. But I'm pretty sure the world is not yet ready for that.

My wife looked at the list of topics which I wanted to address and pointed out that I couldn't really work these subjects into a single, cohesive theme. As usual, she was right.

So - - what I'm going to do here is to mention some of these subjects which I apparently can't work into my address. And then I'll move on to the grand finale, the hallmark of any commencement speech -- a few words of free advice to the new graduates.

I had wanted to talk to you about law and justice.

I wanted to explain my sincere belief that justice is a process, not a result. We occasionally hear of results of disputes in courts and other tribunals and disagree with the result. We are quick to say, "This is not justice !" But reasonable people can - and usually do - disagree on what the proper result for any given dispute might be. They both can't be right. So what is justice ?

Justice occurs when parties to a dispute are able to fully present their positions to impartial people who follow laws which apply equally to all. If these conditions are present, justice is done.

If they are not, justice is not served.

So when we are attempting to measure justice, don't tell me about the result. Tell me about the process - how they got to the result - and then we can tell whether justice was served.

That's what I would have said about justice - if I could have worked it into my theme.

I had wanted to talk to you about the advent of DNA evidence in the courtroom, and how it has revolutionized certain criminal proceedings - not only from the point of proving guilt, but for exonerating innocent people. This is very exciting stuff for me, but perhaps too narrow for this broadly diverse group.

I had wanted to tell you about ten wonderful years I spent as the Chief Judge of the Penobscot Tribal Court and how I was welcomed into that extraordinary group of people that is the Penobscot Indian Nation. I was treated with kindness and hospitality and respect, and shown a way of life which forever changed my perception of the world.

But maybe that's really just between the Penobscots and me.

I had wanted to talk to you about "life paths" and career choices. I could talk to you about my life path - an occupation in law and how stimulating and fulfilling it has been. But that's kind of egotistical and, frankly, I'm not really that all that interesting.

Your life paths are much more interesting. In your occupations, always protect your integrity - it is that by which you will be known and remembered.

For those of you who have or are considering starting families, understand the profound responsibility of parenting a child. You can teach a child to love anything; you can teach a child to hate anything. Teach your children respect and responsibility. Teach by your example.

I could go on about these things, but you know them already.

I had wanted to talk about some colorful characters I've come to know in my court room experiences.

There was Bradley, a skinny little guy who was an accomplished escape artist. He escaped - mysteriously - from dozens of jail cells and baffled the authorities... until they discovered that he was so thin that he could slip between the bars at will. As I entered the courtroom, he was shackled - each arm, each leg, and waist - to the Defendant's chair. From the front of the court room, he called back to me with a broad smile, "I feel like a criminal down here !"

And then there was Martin who paid his fines - fines for convictions for passing bad checks - with (you guessed it) a bad check.

And then there was a creditor trying to collect from a debtor they couldn't locate to serve with a summons. Apparently they had been doing business with a company named Fly by Night

Enterprises. You think they would have known...

True stories indeed, but way too trivial to include in this address.

I had wanted to tell you about some cases I handled as a lawyer.

Like my first case. The charge was Illegal Possession of Moose meat. We won. My client offered to pay me... in deer meat. I declined.

Or I could tell you about the first murder case I defended, and how I looked into the accused's eyes to see if there was any humanity there - and found none.

But these are my stories, and today is about you.

I'd love to talk to you about the law - now there's something that affects you directly.

And we have lots of laws. Sometimes it seems that the law makers must be paid by the pound. Do we really need them all these laws? Or do we simply have too darn many ?

You be the lawmaker. Ask yourself: what minimum basic rules are necessary for a good life in an orderly society ?

You know the answer to this question - you learned these rules in kindergarten. And they boil down to two simple concepts: respect and responsibility - two simple concepts

All of the well intentioned laws written since time immemorial have been attempts to codify these two simple notions. If all of us lived our lives guided by the standards of respect and responsibility, what a wonderful world it would be.

As you move forward today, take a moment to reflect on what you are taking with you. I ask you to embrace these notions of respect and responsibility. Take them with you and let them steer your life's course.

Most of the societal challenges which I identified in my 1973 address are still with us, in some form or another. You will take your place in a society which is often unhelpful to its weak, unforgiving of its troubled, and uncaring toward its needy. Our advancements in humanity have not kept pace with our advancements in technology. As you go forward, guided by the twin beacons of respect and responsibility, you will do your part to meet these ever-changing challenges.

Now, I promised you a few brief words of advice. After considerable thought, I will wind down here with my two suggestions to make a good life better. This is all you need:

First, Learn to recognize a constellation in the winter sky, and

Secondly, Learn to identify a particular type of tree in the forest.

Long after your cell phone is obsolete and your VCR is in the landfill, you will still own your constellation and your tree. Well, you won't actually own them... you'll share them with the ages. But they will be with you for all your days.

I will end with a line from singer/ songwriter Dave Matthews:

"Celebrate... we will... for life is short... but sweet for certain."

Celebrate you will - celebrate with prudence; celebrate with joy; celebrate with the knowledge that you have accomplished something great... and the best is yet to come.

Good luck, graduates.

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