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STEPHEN A. OLLENDORFF COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Sunday, May 11, 2014

2014 OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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First, let me congratulate the Class of 2014. Today is your day.

I feel honored to be invited here to speak to you. Yet, I am mindful of the quote from the American comic, George Jessel, "The human brain is a wonderful organ. It starts working as soon as you are born and never stops until you get up to give a speech."

Recognizing that each generation may be faced with events and circumstances which are different and often beyond its control, I thought I would describe to you how my family faced the challenges and opportunities that they encountered. Hopefully, the decisions they made may relate to you in your decision making process in these very different, exciting, but uncertain times.

My life started with a series of events which affected my thinking for the rest of my life. I was born in July 1938 in Berlin, Germany. On November 9th and 10th of that year, the Nazis, in one of the most important turning points in their anti-Semitic policies, burned 276 synagogues and 7500 Jewish businesses. It was known as "Kristallnacht," the "Night of the Broken Glass."

As fate would have it, the night before Kristallnacht, my parents' landlord had warned them that the Nazis were going to raid our apartment. So, we immediately moved that night to my maternal grandparents' apartment a few miles away. The morning after Kristallnacht would be a dramatic change in the life of our family. My grandfather was arrested at 10:00 a.m. that morning by the Nazis. My parents and I were not at the apartment because, at my grandmother's urging, we were applying for a temporary visa to England at the British Consulate.

By sheer good fortune, my father had a letter from a family friend inviting us to visit him in England. The British Consulate, by reason of Kristallnacht, granted us a visa to leave for England that day. We miraculously obtained plane tickets for us to fly to England at 2:00 that very afternoon. So that night we arrived in England.

My grandfather, after his arrest, was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. My grandmother obtained his release one month later after she, at great personal peril, went straight to the highest Nazi official at Gestapo Headquarters. My maternal grandparents then immigrated to South America and eventually settled in New York after the war. Through their efforts, all four of their children and their families were able to escape from Germany. The entire maternal side of my family survived the Holocaust.

On the other hand, the paternal side of my family was not that fortunate. My paternal grandparents lived in Breslau, Germany. They decided to stay. My paternal grandfather, a colonel in the German army during World War I, was assured of the army's protection. However, when he died in 1942, the Nazis immediately arrested my paternal grandmother and her sister. They were sent to Theresienstadt concentration camp where they both died shortly thereafter. My father's brother had joined the underground and was killed trying to escape Mauthausen concentration camp. His other brother was killed by the Nazis, circumstances unknown. On the paternal side of my family, no one survived WWII except my father.

My parents and I arrived in America in February of 1939. My father, who had been an ophthalmologist in Germany, had to learn the English language and study for the medical boards in New York. Because of a lack of funds, my mother and I moved to Delaware, Ohio at the invitation of Professor Guy Sarvis and his wife Maud. By now, you must surely know, Professor Sarvis taught at Ohio Wesleyan. My mother and I lived with the Sarvis's for a year.

To admit a Jewish family in their home and to be actively protecting the civil rights of minorities, given the times, demonstrated the commitment of Professor Sarvis and his wife to justice and social equality.

After one year, my mother and I reunited with my father in New York after he had obtained his medical license.

Growing up in the 1950s and '60s was, in many ways for me, a time of uncertainty and discrimination. Although in America our lives were no longer in danger, discrimination against Jews manifested itself in very specific ways. Most elite social clubs, golf clubs, fraternities and sororities routinely excluded Jews as a matter of overt policy.

Jews were limited in their occupational opportunities, including holding senior executive positions in major corporations. The Columbia University Eye Institute excluded my father from operating privileges because it excluded Jewish doctors as a matter of policy. This was despite the fact that my father had one of the largest ophthalmic practices in New York City.

As I was growing up, my father made it clear that I should become a doctor because it is the one universal profession I could continue to practice if we ever had to leave America. That was not considered unthinkable at the time. And even recently, my first cousin had to immigrate to the United States from Venezuela because of religious intolerance.

I enrolled at Columbia College as a pre-med student but I never felt comfortable with the thought of becoming a doctor. Thankfully, I failed physics in the first semester of my sophomore year. I remember my physics professor saying he could have given me a D but he thought he would be doing me a disservice in the long run. This was certainly consistent with the advice of the famous basketball coach, John Wooden: "Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."

I dutifully called my father and told him I was switching to law. I ended up graduating from Columbia College and Columbia Law School.

Finding a job in New York City in those days was exceedingly difficult. I had a pretty clear view of the type of lawyer I wanted to be. In the 60's, if you were employed by a Wall Street law firm (none had more than 100 lawyers in those days), you worked six days a week and were completely discouraged from developing your own client base or devoting time to any other economic opportunities. Your hope was to become a partner after seven or eight years and become an interchangeable part of a legal enterprise. Fortunately, I knew this was not the type of law I wanted to practice. As stated so eloquently by Ben Stein: "The indispensable first step to getting things you want out of life is this: decide what you want."

I decided I wanted to be the type of lawyer who could attract clients, who would be involved in all types of entrepreneurial activities, and who would become involved in the community. But, most of all, I valued my freedom -- the freedom to wake up every morning and decide what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it; the freedom not to be accountable for my work schedule every single day; and most importantly, the freedom to be true to myself. Luckily, I had wonderful role models and law firms like K&L Gates helped me fulfill my dreams. As Branch Rickey said: "Luck is the residue of design."

There are two events that dramatically changed my life.

The first occurred while jogging one evening over 30 years ago, when I decided that I would commit a certain amount of my earnings to charity. Under that commitment, the more I earned, the more I would give in both amounts and percentages.

The second event occurred when I read a deeply moving farewell letter that my father's mother wrote to him on her way to Theresienstadt concentration camp.

My father saw the letter for the first time when he received it over 40 years later, at the age of 79. It arrived in the mail at his home in Englewood, New Jersey from an unknown source in South America. This farewell letter had a profound impact on me both because of its contents (my grandmother wrote it with an unrestricted love and an unimaginable dignity and grace in the face of her certain, impending death) and because of the extraordinary circumstances under which my father had received the letter.

The Ollendorff Center later published the letter in a book and, with the help of Jakov Sedlar, a prominent documentary maker, produced a documentary, both entitled "Fate Did Not Let Me Go." The documentary was narrated by Martin Sheen and Liv Ullman. It has been shown all over the world for the past several years, including on 162 PBS stations. Just this January, on Holocaust Memorial Day, it has reportedly been seen by close to 20 million people in 15 European and Asian countries. It will also be shown this summer in Theresienstadt concentration camp, where my grandmother and her sister died.

Mr. Sedlar and I have since collaborated on several more documentaries. In September, we will be producing our first full length movie. I am also one of the principal screenwriters. A new career? Believe me, dreams can become true at any age.

Having a pool of funds available because of my charitable commitment, I was able to undertake charitable activities that I may not have committed to otherwise.

Here are some examples:

The very same Columbia Eye Institute that denied my father operating privileges now has the Annual Dr. Ulrich Ollendorff Lectureship Series.

Each year, the Chairman of the Department, before introducing a prominent guest lecturer, acknowledges, to the amazement of the medical residents, that the institute once had a policy of excluding Jewish doctors.

To me, as both a son and an alumnus, the annual recognition of this discriminatory policy and the willingness to honor my father is a source of great satisfaction. In addition, our family has funded the Ollendorff Diagnostic Center at the Eye Institute in my father's memory.

The Ollendorff Center is also producing a motion picture the "Diary of Anne Frank," which was written by a young Jewish girl during WWII. It will be in Arabic and played by Israeli and Palestinian actors. It will be primarily distributed in the Arab countries.

To my amazement, while the movie was being made, I received an e-mail from a total stranger in Holland. He had sent me a picture of my father's brother, my Uncle Gerhardt. I had never seen his picture before. The emailer had discovered it in one of the archives. The emailer also mentioned that Gerhardt had been in the home of Anne Frank. . . . Coincidence?

The establishment of the Professor Sarvis Travel & Research Grant is also a memorable story unto itself. While talking to three women from Ohio who were on a tour with my wife and me in Thailand, I mentioned how deeply I admired Professor Sarvis. One of the women asked me which university he was connected to. I responded "Ohio Wesleyan." One of the women, Pam Long, responded by saying "my husband, Michael, is the Chairman of the Board of Ohio Wesleyan." . . . Coincidence?

These events reinforced my belief in Dr. Albert Einstein's quote: "Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous."

Shortly thereafter, at the invitation of President Jones, I met with him and Colleen Garland in New York. I am proud to say that Ohio Wesleyan, after reviewing the career and accomplishments of Professor Sarvis, embraced his ideals by sponsoring the Professor Sarvis Travel & Research Grant.

My grandmother's farewell letter also committed me to the cause of never letting Adolf Hitler win the war against Jews as a result of indifference and ignorance. As part of that project, through the Center for Interreligious Understanding, of which I served as President, we placed large Holocaust Menorahs all over the world -- in universities, in major cities in Europe and in churches of various denominations. Each year these Menorahs are lit to commemorate the Holocaust. We also give a smaller version of the Menorah, on a very limited basis, to deserving people and institutions. I was extremely proud to present Pope John Paul II with one of these Menorahs.

So today, it is only fitting that the Ollendorff Center honor Professor Sarvis by presenting this Holocaust Menorah to Ohio Wesleyan. The six figures on the Star of David represent the six million Jewish men, women and children who died in the Holocaust. Imagine how many fewer figures would be on this Menorah if there were more Professor Sarvises in this world.

Before I present President Jones with this Menorah, I would like to leave each of you with these thoughts.

First, it is important to define your goals for not only will they largely determine your opportunities but they will also guide you in your decision making process.

Second, be ready to initiate, pursue and seize the moment of opportunity, even if it appears in the most unlikely of times or circumstances.

Third, try to live your life as you choose to live it, knowing your strengths and weaknesses, while recognizing that certain circumstances may be beyond your control, and last, but by no means least, lead an ethical life which will help nurture the spark of the Divine, which I believe, is in each of us.