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# Napolitano tells NU grads to embrace life's 'zigs and zags'

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 02, 2014

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WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

**College of Social Sciences and Humanities grads watched the video screen during Northeastern's commencement.**

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Janet Napolitano, former US homeland security secretary, urged Northeastern University's 2014 graduating class Friday not to fear life's "zigs and zags."

"Beware the tyranny of the straight line," she repeated during her keynote speech at the school's 112th commencement inside TD Garden in Boston Friday, this spring's first local college graduation.

Using sailboats as a metaphor, she explained to the 3,520 graduates: "Sailboats do not glide through the water in a straight line. They tack. They zig-zag from here to there. That's how they move forward."

When the graduates return for their 50th reunion, she said, "my hope for you is that you will look back on the decades that have passed and see the twists and turns, the tacking,





that are the hallmark of a well-lived life,” said Napolitano, who became president of the University of California system in the fall.

Graduates wearing the standard black robes and mortarboards typed on smartphones, undoubtedly sending texts and tweets, and snapped photos of each other, themselves, and the packed arena. As groups of students shuffled to the stage, other Huskies batted around beach balls.

An estimated crowd of 20,000-plus — including family, faculty, and administrators — looked on, cheering frequently and waving to graduates below. Video of the event streamed on the arena’s Jumbotron.

Napolitano, the former governor and attorney general of Arizona, became the third homeland security secretary and the first woman to hold the job when President Obama appointed her in 2009. She led the Cabinet agency, which was created after 9/11, until 2013.

This past September, she became the first woman president of California’s 10-campus public higher education system, which boasts more than 234,000 students and 208,000 faculty and staff.

Napolitano, who has devoted most of her professional life to public sector jobs, also told the graduates not to let salary dictate their decisions.

“It’s not how much [money] you make in life,” she said. “You don’t go to college so you can punch a clock.”

She added: “The point is making a difference.”

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Napolitano, who appointed Northeastern president Joseph E. Aoun to the Homeland Security Department's academic advisory council two years ago, also sprinkled humor into her speech, including jokes alluding to popular campus-area food and drink options.

"This is the time to ask yourself a few serious questions," she said. "Without Rebecca's, where will I buy chicken fingers? Without Symphony Sushi, where will I take my dates? Without Conor Larkin's, where will I meet up with my friends?"

Napolitano was one of three honorary degree recipients. They also went to rapper and actor James Todd Smith, more commonly known as LL Cool J, and former NFL player Wade Davis, who is openly gay and heads an organization promoting inclusion in sports.

Smith said in an interview before the ceremony that he was overwhelmed and honored to receive the degree, which he called "a crowning achievement."

And there was another reason for his proud grin.

Smith's daughter, Italia Anita Maria Smith, earned a business degree from Northeastern Friday. Her father surprised her by handing Italia her diploma.

"It's a two-fer," he said. "This is a really special day."

It was his second recognition from a major Boston-area university in the past few months. In February, Harvard University named him its Artist of the Year.

"I almost feel like an academic," he said with a chuckle.

Davis called his honorary degree "a blessing."

An activist who works to stop discrimination in sports, he said he remains encouraged by what he sees as a growing culture of acceptance among professional athletes.

Incidents such as the recent racist remarks linked to Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling are "more of the exception than the rule," he said.

"I think that sports has always been a space that has embraced diversity, and now being more intentional about including sexual orientation and gender identity has been really amazing," Davis said.

Student speaker Emily Izzo urged her classmates to find their passion.

"We were not afforded this gift by our parents, our mentors, or ourselves simply to step into jobs or the

next phase of education placidly, but so that we are ready to use our knowledge, our experience, and the tools we have developed to move the earth in every way possible," she said.

Some graduates said the job search has been slow-going. Others have had more success.

Tom Sweeney of Medfield celebrated with his parents, brother, and grandparents. At Northeastern, Sweeney earned degrees in management and finance, completed three on-the-job placements that are Northeastern's hallmark, and studied in Greece. He will soon begin a job at a Boston-based startup.

"We couldn't be more proud," said his father, Jack Sweeney, smiling.

Pennsylvania native Branden Lee said he was thrilled to get his communications degree, adding, "I'm really excited for what's next."

But he said he is also sad to leave friends.

"I have a lot of great memories," he said. "I loved it here."

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