Altoona Mirror “20 Under 20” Awards
Keynote Address
Tom Foley
May 12, 2015

My friend and Editor in Chief Neil Rudel, thank you for that generous introduction and for reading it exactly as my mother wrote it.

Project Coordinator Margaret Moses, Altoona Mirror Publisher Ed Kruger, members of the selection committee—thank you for all your efforts to make this day possible for these outstanding students and their families.

I especially appreciate Neil’s focus in his introductory remarks on the word and the idea of “community.” It certainly describes the work of this committee, but is also underscored in the larger role that all these sponsors play in your community. The CEOs of five of your sponsors are board members at Mount Aloysius, so their contributions to community certainly don’t stop with this luncheon. The officers of our own Board of Trustees at Mount Aloysius are all CEOs at your sponsoring organizations. Congratulations and thanks to all of them.

Finally by way of introduction, welcome to this historic room. There are probably more community meetings held in this room than just about any other location in Blair County. And we all hope that these 20 student “Under-20 All Stars” will have many reasons to be in this space in future years.

Now let me speak to the parents in the room for just a minute. When I sat down to think about this group of extraordinary young people, a number of things occurred to me that I think will make sense to you.

- For these students, “Java” has never been just a cup of coffee, a “tablet” is not something you take in the morning, having a “chat” rarely involves actually talking, and “breaking news” is an oxymoron. They already knew it.

- For these students, women have always piloted war planes, space shuttles, Fortune 500 corporations and the Department of State.

- And here is a sobering thought, even for you parents only in your forties. For these under 20 year olds, Mick Jaggar and Rod Stewart have always been geriatrics, who is Paul McCartney anyway and Madonna is almost 60 for gosh sakes!

- And if they know Robert DeNiro at all it is not because he was Vito Corleone in The Godfather, or Jimmy Conway in Goodfellas or Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver but because he is Greg Focker’s father in law in Meet the Parents.
So we know it’s true, these students have very different life experiences than we did and at Mount Aloysius, we just hope each semester that we’re running fast enough alongside them that we can still relate to them, reach them and teach them.

So that is our continuing challenge—no matter what our age or generation—to meet one another where we are and go forward from there.

And now to our honorees.

You have come of age during two decades of the most intense change this planet has ever known—in all its billion years imagining and reforming itself. For you, change isn’t just a constant; it’s exponential—happening so fast that it seems hard even just to catch your breath. What do I mean? Let me give you some numbers—4, ten, 250,000 and 1 million.

- **4**, *as in exabytes*...that’s 4 times 10 to the 19th power of unique, new information will be generated in the world this year—more information than was generated in the past fifty centuries—5,000 years—put together!

- **10**, *as in the warp speed of technology*. Think about it: when the radio was invented it took thirty-eight years to reach a market audience of fifty million people. It took Facebook two years. It probably takes Lady Gaga about ten minutes. That’s what I meant when I said that breaking news is an oxymoron for you.

- **250,000**, *as in the average number of electronic messages* that the 486 students who graduate from Mount Aloysius last Saturday has sent or received—emails, texts, instagrams, whatever.

- **Million**, *as in we are fast approaching a million words* in the English language....that’s more than 5 times what Shakespeare had to work with. Recent additions, according to the Oxford Dictionary include:

  - **AL DESK-O**: A play on al fresco, which means “dining outside,” this word is perfect for the way we live now, wolfing down food at our desks while messing around on the computer.

  - **MAHOOSIVE**: Even bigger than massive. And it sounds that way doesn’t it? The new *ginormous*.

  - **MAMIL**: Stands for “middle aged man in Lycra” and has to do with the current cycling craze. Observe the MAMIL in his natural habitat. His bike is expensive and his outfit is way more revealing than it needs to be. But Lycra is probably like Facebook to you guys—already out of date!!

Bottom line, the mall-sized computer that put a man on the moon almost 5 decades ago had far less capacity than your iPhones. And by the midpoint of this century, they expect to have an *affordable* computer that can calculate faster than the computational capabilities of the entire human race—put together.
So, what do all these Mach-speed changes and numbers say to us? Personally, I am in awe of you as I am in awe of our three sons who are only a little older than you. I am in awe at how you have taken all this change on, all this new information, absorbed it, processed it, reflected it, refracted it, sometimes rejected it—all of that together helping to produce the outstanding human beings that you are already becoming.

I am star struck that you could live in the midst of so much change, and not only keep ticking, but stand out so fiercely that this committee could identify you in one afternoon meeting—from amongst all the thousands of kids your age in this region.

And as I was thinking about you all I was wondering—how are you going to sustain this? How are you going to keep doing it — how are you going to keep rising to the next challenge, the next wave, the next mountain, the next chord, the next brush or key stroke, the next idea.

You know how—by doing exactly what you have been doing so far. You are going to work hard, you are going to protect your passion, and you are going to remember your people. Let me say a few words about each.

First, you are going to work hard, be persistent, and keep learning as you go.

Did you ever go for a hike or you are just out with your friends, and something is wrong with your shoe—the lace is hanging off, something is rubbing wrong, maybe you have a pebble stuck in there somewhere. Anyway, there is no way you are going to stop what you are doing to fix it—you’re having too much fun.

Don’t want to stop to take it out, you hope is that it will move off to the side of your shoe all on its own—because you just don’t want to stop doing what you are doing. Well, in life that happens all the time—you get pebbles in your shoes, you get rocks in the road or worse than that, metaphorical boulders coming down the mountainside and you think they are after you personally.

I want to remind you that "if you find a path in life with no obstacles in it, the chances are it doesn't lead anywhere." Country singer Carl Perkins puts it a little differently. He sings "if the bed didn't have any rocks in it, the stream wouldn't have any song."

Yes, there will continue to be tough times where "all hands on deck" is the only effective managing principle. But the rocks in the stream bed really are responsible for the “melody” you hear in that offshoot of the “Lil J” where you go fly fishing, and sometimes the obstacles—the pebbles in your shoe or the rocks in in your path—are there just to teach you the lesson on that particular journey.

And the lesson in that case is that it’s not always about the destination—sometimes it’s about the journey. So one, keep working hard, be persistent, keep learning as you go.

Second, protect your passion. Notice I didn’t say, find your passion. You are here today because a lot of you already have. For many of you it is in the arts and/or in community service. Wonderful. Now your job is to protect and expand it—protect your ability to pursue your passion, and develop your ability to share it with others.
Almost exactly fifty years ago, an American President focused on the arts in a now famous speech that he delivered at American college that begins with an A—not Aloysius this time, but Amherst. President Kennedy chose that location to focus the country on the idea that art—in all its forms—is important to the integrity and survival of the nation and to proclaim to the country the importance of protecting the passion of young artists—which he declared was a national imperative.

He did that in a speech about the poet Robert Frost. Here is what he said:

At bottom, he held a deep faith in the spirit of man, and it is hardly an accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power, for he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself. When power leads men towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truth which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.

Kennedy argued that the artist is the “last champion of the individual mind against an intrusive society and an officious state.” And if we were alive today, he might say against the relentless exabytes of new information. The artist, he said, often “sails against the currents of his time.” But “in retrospect...the artist’s fidelity strengthens the fibre of our national life.”

He finished his speech by telling the nation that he saw “little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist.” That is you, that is your place, whether you do your art with a key stroke or a paint brush, with a few strums on the guitar or a few notes warbled into the air. The President was talking about us when he said it is our duty to protect your passion for art. We thank you today for reminding us that it is our duty to protect and promote your artistic abilities. And it is your duty too.

So two, Protect and even expand your passion.

Three, remember your people. You know who I mean. Your family, those friends that were on the swings with you in kindergarten and then again after the prom your senior year. Your Gram or Pap, or that special teacher who first noticed your talent. These are all your people.

Remember them when you are climbing the ladder of your success and remember them even more when you get there. They will keep you human, they will always care for you, and they won’t judge you or your art. But maybe you will become less sure about who those people are as you go through life, get further away, develop bigger ideas or start painting with oil. Let me tell you how I remember who my peeps are.

My father worked in an electronics factory his whole life, never made a big salary, and never had a big job title. My mother, the only child of depression-fatigued parents, gave birth to and raised 12 children, never complained about the dozens of carpool assignments every week, never forgot to leave some dinner in the oven for the ones who got home late from practice.

The two of them worked the busiest booth at our church carnival every year, joined the mother’s and father’s club at each of our schools. My father coached every team at our little school, he worked each chicken barbecue for every good cause in our small town, and my mother fed anybody we dragged through the kitchen door with us. They were family people first and community people right after.
When my father died, it was the biggest funeral that town ever saw—4,000 people came—and every single one of them had a story. My parents didn’t have the best of everything, but they sure made the best of everything—and they were everybody’s people, but especially mine. I am always aware that I, in a real sense, stood on their shoulders when I graduated from high school, then left town for college, became a lawyer, traveled abroad, published my first writing, and even when I became president at Mount Aloysius. Know who your real peeps are, and keep the tie that binds you together.

Make sure you know who your people are before you leave town, not after, and stay close to them always. The cynics say that your generation will be the first to be measured in the three Bs—bits, bytes and bauds. I look out at you today and I don’t think so. Your generation has a knack for remembering your people, and that’s how we will remember you.

Now I have a confession to make—I am not an artist, at least not in the paintbrush sense. I took a class in pottery a few years back and I can tell you for sure there were only 14 people more talented than me in the class, and there were 15 of us in the class.

But I love poetry and want to leave you with some. It’s one of the first poems written by an Irish writer who went on to win the Nobel Prize for literature, it’s one of Michele’s favorites and here it is—Digging by Seamus Heaney:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner’s bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.
The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

Work hard—it's what got you here to this day.

Protect your passion, it will get you through the night.

Remember your people, they will keep you smiling day and night.

And keep “digging,” as Heaney’s metaphor suggests, with whatever tools you have—a paintbrush or an ipad, a palette or a woodblock, pigments or crayons, chalk or charcoal, drums or woodwinds, spatula, spray gun, strings or just a kind word—it’s all good.

And it is a pleasure to honor all the good that brings you here today.

Thank you and congratulations.