

Be Yourself

Cosby Tells Graduates To “Be You” in Commencement Address

After strolling into Gesling Stadium walking a Scottish terrier — Carnegie Mellon’s new “official” mascot — award-winning comedian Bill Cosby told more than 2,100 graduates to be proud, be prepared and be “you” in his entertaining keynote address at Carnegie Mellon’s 110th commencement, Sunday, May 20. He told a tale about how he bombed in his premiere at a famous Chicago nightclub, only to recover in time for the second show to rave reviews. “I don’t care what you do, when you are good you bring you out,” he said.

And by the way, that wasn’t just any Scottish terrier with Cosby. It was Civil and Environmental Engineering Professor Larry Cartwright’s prized pooch, Murray.

The following is Cosby’s address.

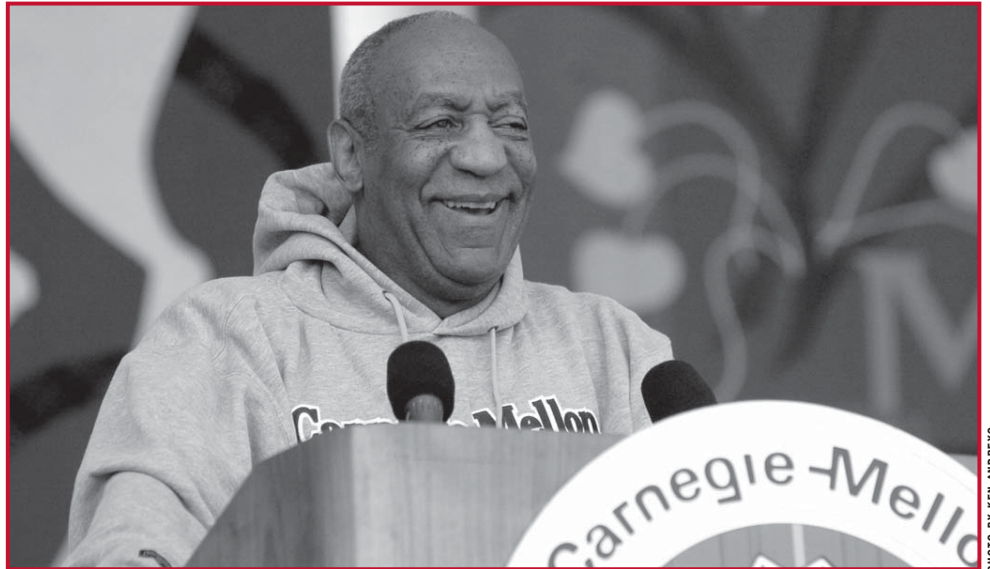


PHOTO BY KEN ANDREYO

HARD TO BELIEVE THAT ANYONE EVER TOLD ENTERTAINMENT ICON BILL COSBY THAT HE STUNK AND WAS A FLOP AS A COMEDIAN, BUT IT’S THE TRUTH. COSBY KEPT THE COMMENCEMENT AUDIENCE ENTERTAINED WITH THE STORY OF HIS GREAT FAILURE AND THE LESSONS GRADUATES COULD LEARN FROM IT.

“Ah, nerds. Why anybody would accept themselves as nerds bothers me. If I’m looking at nerds — according to nerds — I think it has to do with something like you don’t know how to mingle. You don’t know how to get along with other people. Or dance. Or just stand in a room and look human. I don’t know why you want to accept yourselves as being that, because you all have continued on where non-nerds stopped.

Now let’s do the math. They quit. All the non-nerds did that — they said I’m tired, why do I have to know this? You guys continued on. That’s not nerdy. I think it’s very, very brave, considering how many friends you lost. [Laughter] But look at how many friends you gained.

And listen to yourselves having fun. [Cheers and shouts] Oh boy ... that’s enough of that.

I want to get on with YOUR life. Graduation ... I will have you know from my experience, is the most important occasion in family life. ... There’s the wedding, funeral and college graduation. Of the three, the only one that does not have a reputation for a family fight is the graduation. People fight at funerals — knock the coffin over, the corpse is out of the box. Weddings, people are ripping up dresses, bridesmaids don’t like their dresses. But nobody fights at graduation.

(That’s) not to say that (your families) are not confused, because you really are supposed to go some place other than back home. [Laughter] That alone says volumes for a lot of people. Right? These people are taking you back. Those of you who asked to come to this school because it was away from home, you wanted to see if you could

find yourselves, or to see if you could be independent. Now you’re graduating, you are going back home. This is really disappointing. [Laughter] You are not going to be a nerd. You are disappointing people. For God’s sake, get a job. [More Laughter] Wait, we don’t want hostility from the families.

I was 25 years old and I was good. And I knew I was good. I knew I was good because I felt confidence and I was working at a place called the Gate of Horn in Chicago.

NERD: A PREPARED PERSON WHO DOESN’T REALLY GIVE A DAMN ABOUT THE DANCE. — Bill Cosby

It was a folk place, and I was one of the fastest-rising new comedians in the United States of America. And I knew I was good. I looked across the street from the Gate of Horn and there was a place called Mr. Kelly’s. Mr. Kelly’s is where I wanted to be. It was a nightclub, they sold liquor but they had great comedians playing there — big name tags, the biggest. They had been on TV. That’s where I wanted to go, and while playing the Gate of Horn I knew that I should be there.

And finally some five months later, after playing nightclubs, coffee houses, Greenwich Village, two brothers came, the Marienthal Brothers, to see me in this club that held 90 people and they had frat parties and weird things. I’m just a half a year out of the projects; I don’t understand this new coffee stuff with the chocolate chips in them and the Italian biscuits that are hard. And one of the owners said to me, ‘The Marienthal Brothers from Mr. Kelly’s are here to see you.’ And it

didn’t even bother me. I said, ‘Well, let them see me.’ That’s how good I am. And I went on stage — we worked from 8 p.m. until 4 in the morning. My job description was to break up the monotony of the folk singers. I was good.

I did my 20 minutes of whatever, and the Marienthal Brothers said, ‘We’d like to meet you.’ There was no backstage. We went to some storage room above the coffee shop. And they said we like you and we’re going to give you — and at the time, pardon me, I was

making \$120 a week, this was in the ‘60s ... the early ‘60s. There still was no money. New York was very expensive. They offered me \$400 a week and airfare to Chicago. I said, ‘I’ll take it.’ I flew out for two weeks. I was the opening act. I don’t remember who the closing act was. It was a female singer. And I had a suit and a tie.

... I went in about 3 o’clock to get the feel of the room. And I walked around looking at this club because I’m here, and I began to look at the pictures of these great comedians, men and women who were on TV. I had not been on TV as of yet. But I’m good. I went up to the room, this was around 4:30, and first show is 8 o’clock. I began to talk from within to myself about these great comedians. And I began to see this club as some kind of mountain that I was approaching. I began to feel a loss of confidence. And I began to talk to myself in such a way that a heaviness began to push and make me feel inferior as a

performer. By 7 o’clock I had done one of the most masterful jobs of making myself feel that I did not belong in this club. And I couldn’t get out of it. I kept telling myself, ‘But you are good!’ But these other voices kept coming: ‘But you are not that good, and people, the audiences, know. These people know. And when they see you, they are going to know that you are not good, you don’t belong here.’

There was a knock on the door, and it was one of the fellows that introduces and he said, ‘How you doing, Bill? How do you want to be introduced?’ I said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, this is one of America’s fastest-rising new comedians, and then my name.’ He said okay and he went down, and I went back to my favorite depression. (Later) he said, ‘Come on down, take your place.’ I wasn’t ready. I didn’t feel ready. And I felt this audience knew more than I.

And I stood behind the curtain and the fellow introduces and then you walk out and you stand on the stage. The place holds, oh, ... about 150 people. And then the trio was playing, do, do, do. Ta da, shoop [Cosby does a jazz scat.] ‘And now ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Kelly’s is proud to present one of the fastest-rising new comedians of the United States of America! Let’s have a big hand for Bill Cosby!’ The people started to applaud, and I walked up and I looked out at these people, and it got worse. I did what supposedly had been a 35-minute act in 18 minutes, and I said thank you, and I walked off. I don’t remember what the audience did. I went up to my dressing room. I was not nauseous, I just felt this is the end and I’m going back to Temple University and I’m going to finish out my senior year and play pro ball

Go “Nerds!”

and maybe get paralyzed for \$13,000 a year as a quarterback with the New York Giants.

The Marienthal Brothers knocked on the door, and I looked at both of them, and they looked at me and I said, ‘Please, understand me. I don’t want to be paid. I’m going back to the hotel and I am going to go home. And I will return the round-trip money. I want to thank you for the opportunity.’ And one of the brothers said, ‘Good.’ The other one said, ‘Yeah. We both agree — you need to go back. You need to go back and you need to go back to college and you need to finish up your career. And while you are back at the hotel, do us a favor and send Bill Cosby back here for the second show, because you stink. And ask Bill Cosby why he sent you.’ And they left.

Well, I would like to tell you that that speech — I mean if this was a movie it would be that I went on stage and I killed them in the second show. (But) it got worse. I didn’t know what I was going to do for the second show. And the time was coming, coming, coming, coming. (The fellow that introduces you said) ‘Will you please set yourself, sir?’

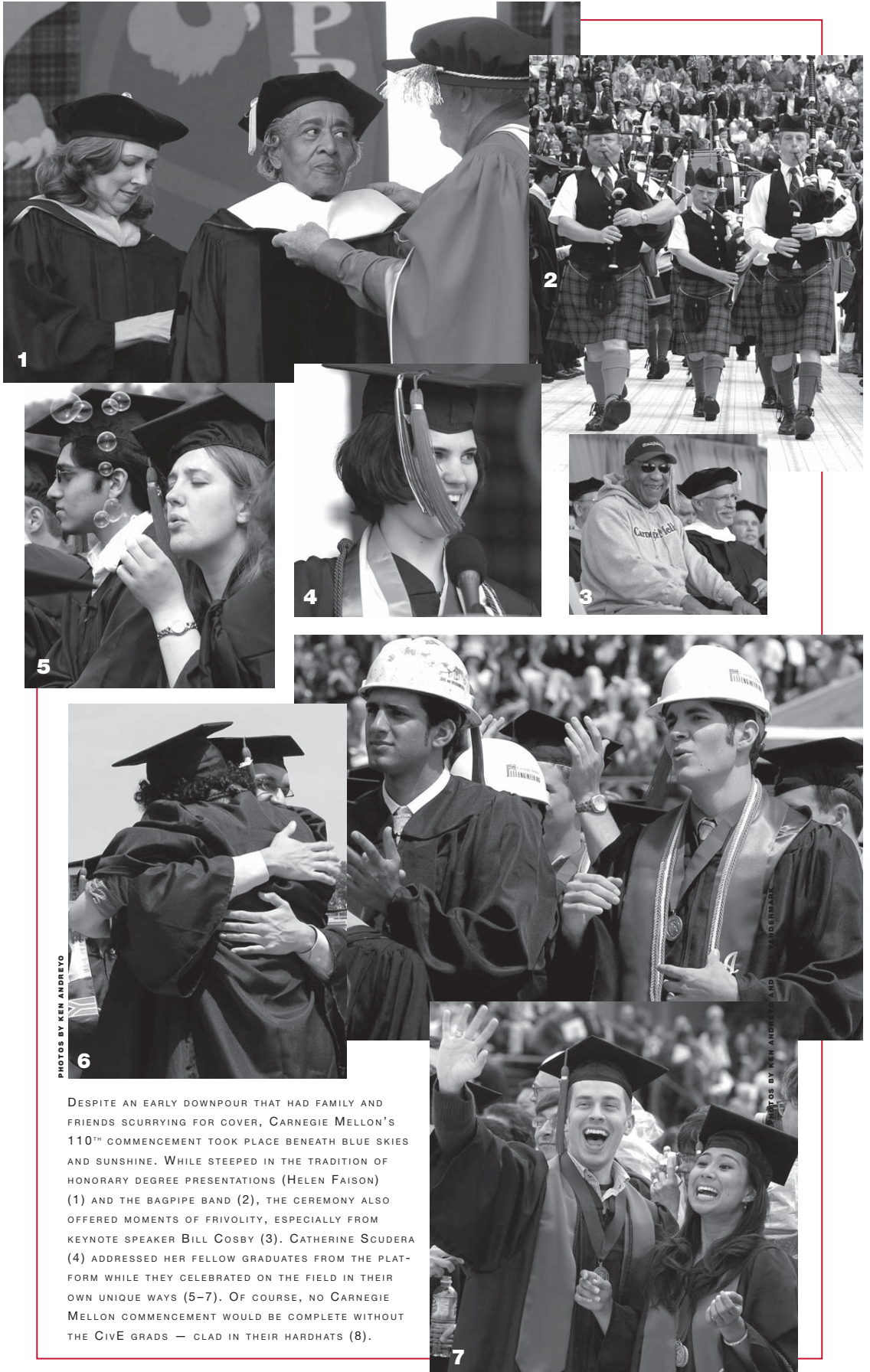
And I went down and I stood behind the curtain. [Jazz scat] Da, da, da. And the man said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, Bill Cosby.’ I said, ‘What are you doing? The guy said, ‘I beg your pardon?’ I said, ‘Where is the intro I gave you?’ He said, ‘Did you see the first show?’ And we started a repartee back and forth. I forgot all about that mess I fed myself, and the audience started to laugh and thought it was in fact a part of the show. And I did my 36-minute act in an hour and 10 minutes. The poor woman following me to this day will not speak to me because I destroyed the place. I pranced, I moved, I ad-libbed. When I came off, the guy said, ‘Man, that was a great show.’ I said, ‘Yeah, ... this is the first time I have seen at least 80% of it.’ The Marienthal Brothers said, ‘Gee whiz, thank you. Where is that boy who was here for the first show?’ I said, ‘He’s gone, man.’

The totality is what I’m saying to you — don’t talk yourself into not being you at any time. You don’t have an excuse that works when you say, ‘But I was nervous.’ That’s not you. That’s not how you got here. Yeah, you can be nervous, it’s good for you, tunes you. But people want to see YOU. I don’t care what you do, when you are good you bring you out. [Applause] Thank you.

It’s not that you stand around and measure yourself according to diplomas and degrees. You are you, and you are not to ... put yourself beneath anybody. ‘Oh, I’m from Harvard.’ ‘Yes, I’m from Carnegie Mellon.’ [A horn blares and Cosby responds.] Is that the alma mater?

Be proud. But you can’t be proud and you can’t carry it out unless you are sure of yourself and prepared. And that’s where the nerds stand tall. That’s how you got that name, that’s what it means. I looked it up. ‘Nerd: a prepared person who doesn’t really give a damn about the dance.’ So in closing, I close.

[Long pause ... Applause]



PHOTOS BY KEN ANDREYO

PHOTOS BY KEN ANDREYO AND WANDERLARK

DESPITE AN EARLY DOWNPOUR THAT HAD FAMILY AND FRIENDS SCURRYING FOR COVER, CARNEGIE MELLON’S 110TH COMMENCEMENT TOOK PLACE BENEATH BLUE SKIES AND SUNSHINE. WHILE STEEPED IN THE TRADITION OF HONORARY DEGREE PRESENTATIONS (HELEN FAISON) (1) AND THE BAGPIPE BAND (2), THE CEREMONY ALSO OFFERED MOMENTS OF FRIVOLITY, ESPECIALLY FROM KEYNOTE SPEAKER BILL COSBY (3). CATHERINE SCUDERA (4) ADDRESSED HER FELLOW GRADUATES FROM THE PLATFORM WHILE THEY CELEBRATED ON THE FIELD IN THEIR OWN UNIQUE WAYS (5–7). OF COURSE, NO CARNEGIE MELLON COMMENCEMENT WOULD BE COMPLETE WITHOUT THE CIVe GRADS — CLAD IN THEIR HARDHATS (8).