

Latoyia Edwards:

Good morning! Good morning! Good morning!

My name is Latoyia Edwards, morning anchor for NBC10 Boston and NECN. I bring you boundless joy, boundless excitement, and boundless enthusiasm to be a part of your big day!!

Let me warn you now — if you were expecting a low-energy commencement speech where it is so boring that you could catch a quick nap — I am sorry, you've got the wrong speaker.

The way we are going to keep elevating the atmosphere in this arena is by you participating. This is your commencement address!

Let's start with activity to get us going —

Let me speak first to you — the parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandmas, grandpas, loved ones, and friends of the outstanding graduates —

If your heart is bursting with pride right now —bursting with pride that your child, your sweet baby whom you witnessed saying their first words, learning to walk, then run, —

If you are beaming with pride that your loved one met all the benchmarks — from the early school years, remember how cute they were in kindergarten, then middle school, then high school?!

Your graduate has made it through the storm, overcome the distractions, surpassed expectations, and met their goals. Families, if you are beyond proud of your graduate this morning,

I call on you to stand up right now —

This is no time to be prim and proper —

Stand up out of your seat, let them hear you cheer loudly, and let's give them a hearty round of applause!!!!

Beautiful. You may sit ...

Now I want to speak with you — our sensational graduates:

If you appreciate the love and support that you've received along your wonderful journey, ... if are grateful for every sacrifice made on your behalf, ... if you appreciate your family being there in the easy and the tough moments, cheering you on from the stands, worrying about you, if you appreciate your loved ones having your back, if you appreciate your family and friends showing up today, bright and early sitting in this arena to cheer you on ...

Graduates, if you have the deepest appreciation for your family and friends, then it's time to show it — get out of your seat graduates and make a joyful noise, shout to the rooftops and give a huge round of applause for your loved ones right now!! —

Thank you! — please take your seat ...

And finally, for everyone in the MassMutual Center right now —

If you respect the dedication of the Western New England University family of educators, leadership team, and staff members who contributed to getting our graduates to this monumental and precious moment,

If you respect the level of service from the president, to the deans, to the professors, to the admins, to the clerk at the bookstore, to the food service professional who served you meals in the dining halls, to the maintenance staff who maintained the facilities,

If you respect and appreciate all of them, please join me right now in giving a big thank you round of applause to Western New England University.

I love it!!!

Let me take a quick survey — show of hands here:

Raise your hand if you've attended a graduation ceremony before.

Raise your hand if you forgot everything that the commencement speaker said as you soon as you left the building.

Exactly.

I have two missions:

Number one: don't waste your time!

Number two: share with you things that I wish my commencement speaker had shared with me. a short recipe for success.

So, let's get started.

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1) The first delicious ingredient in this recipe — is to create a bucket list ...

And I mean, write down the dreams that are so outrageous — you may be even too shy to say them out loud, too shy to even say it to your closest friend. I remember the first time I gave that piece of advice to a group of teenage mothers I was invited to speak with in nearby Holyoke.

I showed up in a designer suit and fancy heels, and I told them I was a journalist —

They scanned me from head to toe and said writing a bucket list was a waste of their time —they said I clearly grew up in the perfect life, with the perfect white picket fence home, two parents who spoiled me, and I did not know the struggles of what they were going through as teen moms.

I told them never to judge book by its cover —because the only thing they got right about my story was that my parents spoiled me.

My life was perfectly imperfect — my mother was 16 and my father as 18 when I was born.

I gravitated to journalism surprisingly as young as elementary school. I wanted to give a voice to people who, like me, were told our voices did not matter — I was a child growing up in a low-income Boston neighborhood where gangs, drug deals, and violence were present. My parents taught me early on that my environment did not dictate my future.

So, I had the audacity to dream of a future where I could tell stories on tv. I was a nerdy kid who enjoyed all things spelling, grammar, public speaking, and writing. I started doing research in the third grade for a way to combine my favorite subjects and get paid well for it. I was sick struggling financially.

My research came up with a career in broadcast journalism. *But* on the local television news channels, there were very few women who looked like me — my favorite was Liz Walker, and I watched her religiously.

So, while homicides and fistfights were happening in my neighborhood, I had the temerity to believe that I could one day be a news anchor. I even wrote my first bucket list — in the sixth grade!

On that list, I wrote down my heart's desire to be seen — using phrases like, “please God, let my type of beauty be celebrated one day and not feel othered so much — maybe I could do something outrageous and affirming like win like a beauty pageant — a pipe dream at that time.

I wrote on my bucket list — dear God, let me become a news anchor who gets the big interviews like Oprah, interviews that touched people's hearts so deeply that I'd be featured in magazines and win awards. you can imagine how many times I was made fun of growing up with this bucket list and those big dreams in my heart. but I kept them anyway ...

despite the naysayers ...

I'll never forget — in college, I was dating a communications major at another school. and one day, he asked me what I wanted to be when I finished Emerson College — I told him I wanted to be a local news anchor.

He looked at me thoughtfully for a long moment — and my heart melted — I got butterflies in my stomach thinking to myself — finally someone besides my mom and dad can see me in that role.

Then his head dropped back, and his booming laughter bellowed from him. he said, you know your name is Latoyia — right — they don't let ghetto names like Latoyia on tv.

Well, needless to say, that was our last date. Years later, I did bump into him one day at the grocery store in the deli meat aisle. I didn't recognize him, but he recognized me and he said —

Hey Latoyia, I catch you on tv every now and then.

I said thank you, and we chatted for a moment, and then he said something that made my jaw drop —

“I always knew you would make it in the news business. Remember, I told you that. I am so proud!”

of course he did!

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My journalism journey hasn't been easy. Consultants have told me my features are too strong, too ethnic. I was encouraged to wear my hair straight because it's reportedly more pleasing — but less like my authentic self.

One college professor even encouraged me to use my middle name, Cimone — instead of Latoyia in order to make viewers comfortable — but I've finally learned that I can only be myself — and once I truly embraced that sentiment — doors began to fly open.

Over the last year, I was named New Englander of the Year and inducted in the Dorchester Hall of Fame for my decades of being willing to ask the tough questions during big stories.

And *that* brings me to my second ingredient in the recipe for success! It's a toughie!

2) Don't be afraid of having the hard conversation or facing an uncomfortable moment head on.

I know it's easier said than done — I used to chicken out too — but my advice would be to instead let the nerves, anxious feelings, the discomfort around conflict serve as your fuel — pushing you to prepare harder to handle anything that comes your way.

I think back to many controversial and uncomfortable moments when I served as moderator during televised debates.

Right before medical marijuana was legalized, I had to ask former governor Charlie Baker if he ever smoked marijuana on live tv — *and* — in front of an auditorium full of viewers, for pete's sake. Talk about awkward — marijuana was still illegal at that time.

But surprisingly, he said yes to the question — and the crowd loved it. I think it got him some votes.

During another debate between the final two Boston candidates for mayor, our station had the ingenious idea to have them sit super close and face each other with me in the middle. It was powerful television because they had to make eye contact and speak directly at each other.

So, the candidates arrived early, sat down, spoke very briefly, and then sat silently across from each other for 5 long minutes. They had to do this until the debate started!!

Well, as you can imagine — there had been a lot of negative stories on the campaign trail, accusations of potential unethical behavior and bending the rules, and it got really uncomfortable — the silence between them was deafening...

The atmosphere was so thick with tension — and we still had 4 minutes until the debate went live — so instead of making up an excuse to leave the set — I looked at them both and said the first thing that popped in my head —

“This is a big moment — I know you are both people of faith — shall we pray?”

Surprisingly, they both took my hands and bowed their heads. Now up to that point, the only prayer I had recently shared out loud was “dear God, please don’t let my husband get home before my online orders arrive.” But in this moment, I found the words — “please protect and give these candidates strength in their support for people in the city.”

Totally off the cuff. Totally born out of research of who each candidate was in advance. It totally diffused the negativity in the room.

The final uncomfortable conflict I will share came during another governor’s debate.

One candidate was down in the polls. In a last-minute move to change the narrative, that person put a story in the paper a couple hours before the debate questioning my integrity in the coin toss which determined who speaks first in the debate — a coin toss that was so pristine we filmed it and sent the video to each candidate to prove there was not an ounce of bias. But the negative story was a way to undermine our fair process minutes before the debate —

I was livid that after months of research, prep, and studying every political issue, my integrity was being questioned for nonsense — I felt like running...

But instead of shrinking — I got down to business and drafted a strategy for any scenario if that candidate brought the topic up on live tv during the debate. I had minutes to go ... so I practiced the strategy several times and then steeled myself, ready for political theatrics —

Then, the candidate arrived at our studio and walked right up to me with their spouse — and I’m ready for verbal fireworks at any moment — we stood feet apart — looked right into each other’s eyes — and all of the sudden the candidate says,

“Great to see you, Latoyia. bring it in. I’m a hugger. Let me introduce you to my spouse.” And never mentioned the controversy one time during the live debate.

It was a relief. I was proud of myself — because I was prepared for a fight — that thankfully I did not have to have in front of viewers.

3) My final ingredient to the recipe is all about the energy that we started with when I first said good morning to you today —

“Bring that passion and that intensity to your work, but don’t let your work overshadow your family.”

I had to learn that lesson the hard way.

Listen, I love my career. I love doing the legwork to get big interviews that no one else gets. I enjoy visiting and getting to know families after my work hours to build connections and secure exclusives.

I love logging and editing video and writing strong pieces. I love getting up early and staying far too late to get the job done.

I thrive on hosting special reports, breaking news. and I do this while sometimes hosting six events for various worthy charities in a month.

This drive, this connection to my work has had me miss or come late to many family events.

I remember my mom calling me one Saturday before Mother’s Day to ask me, “where are you?”

I said, “what do you mean?”

She said, “Hello! it’s Kari’s birthday!” — my nephew was turning 4.

I said, “Ooh ma, I’m so sorry I forgot.”

She said, “No problem. The whole is family is here; we will wait to cut the cake and sing happy birthday until you arrive.”

I said, “No — you don’t understand ma. I am in an evening gown. I am not coming. I can’t come. I am hosting a gala fundraiser for zoos in the area.”

She said, “Isn’t this your third gala this month?” I said yes. She said, “you missed his birthday last year.”

I sighed, frustrated, and said I was sorry. My mother took a beat, brightened up, and said, “don’t worry about it. We’ll cut you a piece of cake and make you a plate and put it aside for you.”

I said, “Ok. Thank you.”

She said, “I love you” and hung up.

That’s my mom. Cherishes her kids. No guilt trips, ever! Made a huge deal out of every relative’s birthday, graduation, and any achievement! Just our biggest cheerleader.

She loved to say I was spoiled. Called me every day at work to tell me how she likes my dress or my story. During the pandemic, when everything was shut down and closed off, her calls were even more energizing ...

I remember on February 15th 2021; I was at work feeling awesome. I had just recorded a tv special. My cell phone was vibrating in my bag. I grabbed the phone, expecting my mom to be on the other line with her usual fun conversation — but it was my sister.

She said, “Toy-- Mom is not waking up from her sleep.” Then everything went gray.

I remember snippets from what happened next, somehow making it to my car, then speeding to my mom’s house from my job, rushing through her front door to see my siblings, nieces, and nephews with swollen eyes —

Knowing the truth before they told me —

My mom had passed away in her sleep. An autopsy would list heart issues related to COVID.

My heart has never recovered.

—

If you don’t remember any piece of advice that I give you this morning, remember to never take anyone who loves and supports you for granted.

Instead, honor them.

And that’s why I am going to take a quick moment to acknowledge my squad — who sacrificed their time to travel with me to be here to cheer you on today —

I have learned the hard way — and I want to have my husband Jesse, daughter Nina and son Eli briefly stand — please join me in giving them a quick round of applause —

Thank you very much for helping me in honoring them.

Oh — and remember how I mentioned the importance of writing a bucket list and speaking your dreams aloud?

I have a little show and tell.

Remember I wrote down winning a beauty pageant to celebrate all forms of beauty? — Well, here is my Miss Massachusetts USA crown. I show you this to demonstrate that it’s possible.

Remember I wrote on my down on my bucket list I wanted to be a journalist so committed to excellence that I earn industry awards? — Well, I’m proud to share with you not one but two regional Emmy Awards.

I am a kid born in a housing project ... born to two teenage parents — who taught me that if I could believe it, I could achieve it.

That’s my story. But graduates, your future is even brighter —

You are an exceptionally accomplished group of scholars with unmatched expertise in business, engineering, biology, chemistry, communication, manufacturing, forensic and computer science.

So, get that bucket list ready!

Embrace challenges! Let them fuel you to greater heights!

Most importantly, if you don't remember anything else I say, please keep this with you:

Bring the utmost passion and intensity to your work but let it pale in comparison to how much you show love to the people who love and support you.

My name is Latoyia Edwards. Thank you for your time — I wish you the greatest launch into your next chapter.