Dean Clark, Distinguished Faculty, honored guests and of course our new Grady grads, it is truly a pleasure to be here today. Before I begin, I would like to congratulate all of the parents who are present, because the day has finally come when your child is off of your payroll and hopefully onto someone else’s payroll. My son Elliott just got accepted into Grady, so hopefully two short years from now, I will be in the audience at his graduation.

I had the pleasure of attending Grady’s spring Convocation address, which was given by Ed Bastian, who is the president of Delta Airlines. Some of you may have been there as Mr. Bastian gave one lucky graduate two round-trip first-class tickets to anywhere in the world that Delta flies. It was a very exciting moment, and I thought the young lady who won the tickets was going to faint from the excitement. Sadly, I stand before you today bearing no such gifts, but if any of you would like to get a free tour of CNN, I will be glad to show you around.

When I was chosen for the John Holliman award in March, they told me that the recipient traditionally gives this address in December. I initially panicked, as I have never spoken to an audience this large or this intelligent. Then I remembered that I took a public speaking course as an elective in 1979, so I consider myself totally prepared to speak to you today.

Just before I graduated in March of 1980, CNN came to Grady to interview for positions at a new all-news network. It’s hard to believe now, but only five people interviewed for the jobs. My advisor and most of my professors told me to forget about this CNN thing and go work at a small local TV station, because that’s what Telecommunication Arts majors did in those days. Despite their advice, I took the job at CNN. You might say that I was in the right place at the right time.

By now, our PR and advertising majors are probably tweeting: listening to some TV guy I have never heard of give the Convocation address. Couldn’t they get us former Today show anchor and current Inside Edition host
Deborah Norville, who graduated around 1980? Your career in journalism has a lot better chance of resembling my 31-year career than it does of emulating a network star. Unless you marry a Kardashian or Casey Anthony, most of us will probably never hear of you and that’s perfectly fine. You will work behind the scenes in anonymity, and if you stick with it, you wake up one morning and you realize that wow, you have directed over 17,000 television shows, and Dean Clark wants you to give the convocation address. And thirty-something years from now, I suspect that Dean Clark will be asking one of our new graduates to give this address.

Graduates, today is a culmination of a lifetime of work for both you and your parents. In a few short hours, your life will change because you will be able to walk thru the arch for the first time. Walking thru the arch symbolizes more than just graduation. It symbolizes the beginning of a new way of life. For example, your Georgia football tickets just got a whole lot worse and way more expensive. Some of you will go to graduate school, but for the rest of you, the whole focus of your life changes. Since you were about five, you have gotten up every day and gotten ready for school, studying hard so you could go to a good college, which we all know you did. And in college, you did your best to get some studying done between the parties so that you could get ready for your chosen career. Now, you are educated, you are a college graduate and you are ready for the future. You are in the right place at the right time.

The job hunt probably makes you a little nervous, and what you are looking for is a job like mine. I don’t wear a tie to work, I am at the top of the television production food chain, and I get paid to watch TV! Unless your mother is Oprah Winfrey, you are going to have to take the stairs, not the elevator on your way to the top. As AC/DC sings, it’s a long way to the top if you want to rock and roll.

Before I continue, I have a question for our graduates: what do I have in common with the presidents of CNN and MSNBC? I’ll have that answer in a moment, but first…

You are a new college graduate and you want glamor, but you get an entry-level job that may seem menial. Your first job may be as a teleprompter operator, a floor director or as a script ripper. Four years of college for this? I have a master’s degree and I am sorting scripts for a TV anchor? But you really are one of the most important people on the team. Have you seen the
face of an anchor whose teleprompter operator is on Facebook and has stopped rolling the script? Not pretty. Have you seen how silly an anchor looks when she is looking at the wrong camera because the floor director has missed a cue? Or have you seen what a show looks like when an anchor’s scripts are in the wrong order? It’s chaos in the control room.

So work hard at your first job. You are learning and you are earning. You may feel overqualified for it, but the teleprompter operator of today becomes the network president of tomorrow. And that is the answer to the question of what the heads of CNN, MSNBC and I have in common. We all started our TV careers at entry-level positions at CNN.

I know you are all concerned about your future, and the trouble with the future is, it’s so hard to predict. But there are some things that we can predict. As journalists, you will cover future wars, elections, and arrests of Jersey Shore cast members. And the technology that you cover these stories with will get better and better. When I started out in television, it was a big deal to get a live shot on the air via satellite. At times it would take a million-dollar satellite truck hours to get to a story so we could have live pictures. We would put a font on the screen that said “via satellite,” not because it was impressive that the pictures were from a satellite, but because the pictures were so bad. Now we can get instant live shots from laptops and $200 iPhones. You saw a lot of these shots during the recent coverage of unrest in Libya, Egypt and Syria. The picture is sometimes not so great, but there’s now no limit to where you can go to cover a story live.

One more thing that we can predict is that everything will change. Do not fear change, embrace it. The iPad I am using today is symbolic of the digital media revolution that started right around when most of our new graduates were in elementary school. Remember the good old days, when our pictures were on film, our audio was on CDs, and our video was on tape? You went to the library to read a book, and you had your newspapers and magazines delivered. Most people accessed the internet through AOL, and if you wanted a movie, you drove to your local Blockbuster to see what was left on the shelves. Fast forward to today, where almost all media can be found on the iPad, a device that didn’t even exist two years ago. Newspapers. Movies. Magazines. Books. Music. Video. These industries are not dead, but their old-style delivery methods have changed. Most iPad users don’t create program content. They are voracious consumers of media who program their own personal network with content that is tailored to their
individual wants and needs. And it is the graduates on this stage who will
supply the content that people want, including the latest updates on Lindsey
Lohan, Miley Ray Cyrus, and Justin Bieber. It is truly an exciting time to be
venturing out into the mass media.

I have one last thought for our Grady Grads. If people tell you that
something will never work, prove them wrong. Stick to your convictions.
Never be afraid to fail and never give up. This is the time of your lives
when you can take chances, and if it doesn’t work out, then move onto
something else. When Ted Turner launched CNN, it was seen in less than
one million homes. They said it would never work, that nobody wanted to
watch 24-hour news. For the first five years or so, CNN looked like a big
failure. Turner stuck with it because he believed he was right and CNN
became a huge success.

So congratulations to you, children of the 90’s. I am a child of the sixties,
and my generation had the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and tie-dye. Your
generation got the Backstreet Boys, N-Sync and Beanie Babies. This is
probably the most important day of your lives. You thought you were hot
stuff when you graduated high school, but you are sizzling hot now. Other
events will eclipse this day, but for now, revel in your accomplishments, for
you are truly in the right place at the right time. Thank you.