

**Special Services Commencement Address**  
**Eastern New Mexico University – Roswell**  
**July 24, 2008**  
**By: Keith A. Harris**

Good afternoon and welcome! I consider it a great honor and privilege to speak with you today. Believe it or not, thanks to my son Tim and his belief that he should attend college for four years, I'm attending my fourth consecutive graduation ceremony for this program. Congratulations Tim and congratulations to all the graduates of 2008!!

Before I begin, I'd like to make good on a promise I made to one of the 2008 graduates, Mr. Christopher Moore. I promised Chris that I'd pass along a birthday wish for his mother who's in the audience today. Happy birthday Christina!! You have many reasons to celebrate.

I have a story to share with you all today. It's a very personal story and contains many of the elements of any great story. There are some scary parts, some funny parts, heroes, villains, angels, miracles, pain, laughter, tears....well, you get the idea.

My story begins on a cold and wet January morning in 1986. My wife Jeannie had just given birth to our second son, Timothy. Shortly after Tim's birth, our doctor asked me to follow him to a separate room to have a talk. Our doctor told me that Tim had Down syndrome and asked me if I knew what that meant. My head was spinning – panic had clearly set in. He then asked me if I wanted to tell my wife or whether he should tell her. I told him that I would.

As long as I live, I'll never forget the look on Jeannie's face as I entered the room. She knew instinctively that something was wrong. My heart broke for her, for our newborn son Tim, and for our family. Would our lives ever be the same? Raise your hand if you've lived through a similar scene. It's not something I'd wish on anyone.

Well, time has a way of changing our perspectives if we're open to it. A few weeks later, I got the nerve up to call a local support group and a short time later we were visited at home by a family with a three year old daughter with Down syndrome. The doorbell rang; I opened the door and was greeted by one of many angels I'd have the chance to meet in my life. This particular angel was about two and a half feet tall, blond, and had a smile and a laugh that could light up a room. The afternoon flew by, the angel played with our son Danny, and their family life looked pretty normal to me. Hope emerged. The fear and dread faded. Life moved ahead.

Several very busy years passed and suddenly Tim was in first grade. Our family had grown and we now had four sons, all two years apart in age; Tim being second oldest.

One afternoon, we got a phone call from the elementary school that Tim attended asking us to come in for a meeting concerning Tim. The school's playground was flooded from recent rains and apparently, when the bell rang ending recess, Tim walked to the center of the flooded area and wouldn't come out to return to class. No amount of coaxing, pleading, or threats seemed to work. Finally, one of the duty teachers had to take off her shoes and hike to the center of the puddle and carry Tim out.

During the meeting the principal suggested that because of his disability, maybe Tim didn't understand what he was being told. I suggested that he understood perfectly, but just didn't agree that his fun should be routinely ended by bells. This was one of the moments when we knew clearly that Tim had a mind of his own.

More time passed and now Tim was in Eldorado High School in Albuquerque. Tim was enormously popular in High School, mostly I think because of his uncanny knack for connecting with everyone – no matter what group or click they belonged to. The athletes, the cheerleaders, the brainy kids, the skateboarder crowd, the group that all dressed in black and smoked cigarettes like chimneys across the street – they all called Tim friend. Well, almost everyone.

A story we heard, after the fact, occurred during Tim's freshman year. Apparently, a couple of boys decided to corner Tim every day after school and make him give up his left over lunch money. Tim, being a pacifist, didn't resist or tell anyone. This apparently went on for some time. One afternoon that fall, during the daily shakedown, loud footsteps came from down the hall. It was the Varsity football team heading out to practice. The boys, many of whom had known Tim from elementary school saw the villains in action.

What happened next was described to us later by Tim. "The team dented the lockers in the hall with those guys", Tim said. "Oh, and they called them bowling balls and slid them down the hall, too". The "bad guys" were warned that if they ever went near Tim again they would be very, very sorry. Some angels wear football uniforms and cleats.

During high school, we witnessed another series of miracles and met many more angels. Tim's Adaptive PE teacher, Michelle Chavez, decided that she should make her class into a Special Olympics team. She also decided that this team should be presented to the school as part of the overall athletic program. As fate would have it, her team won a gold medal during their first ever State Basketball Tournament.

During the Fall Sports Assembly that year, Tim as team captain was introduced and led the entire school in his team's cheer – WE ARE THE EAGLES. Tim's cheer was followed by a 10 minute standing ovation by the entire student body and staff of Eldorado High School. The moment was electric.

High School produced many other remarkable moments for our family. Tim was elected Homecoming King during his senior year by the widest margin of votes in school history, was named student of the year at graduation time, was elected to the student senate, was

on the front page of the Albuquerque Journal, on the radio, and on television. We realized that we'd come a long way from that scared couple in the hospital so many years before.

In high school, Tim met Ashten Pick. Ashten was in Tim's graduating class and for some reason that I think only angels fully understand, decided that Tim should be her true friend for life. From the day they met, Ashten and Tim have been fast friends. Through good times and bad; through laughter and tears, they've been inseparable. Ashten helped Tim get his first job as a host at Red Robin restaurant in Albuquerque where she worked. She gave Tim countless rides, sang countless songs with him, and included him fully in her life. To this day, they still have private jokes that only they understand.

My gratitude, respect, and unconditional love for this young woman cannot be fully expressed in words. Would you all like to meet her? She's here today in the audience. Ashten, would you please stand? Ashten Pick – YOU ARE LOVED. After the ceremony today, my advice to each of you is to take a moment to meet her in person. It's not everyday you have the chance to meet a genuine angel.

In the fall of 2004, Tim embarked on his next life step by moving to Roswell to attend this remarkable program. Like all of the parents we've met over the years, we were very apprehensive about Tim moving away from home.

Over the past four years, Tim has grown and matured beyond our wildest dreams. He's learned, like we all need to at some point, that in addition to being fun, life sometimes includes hard work, tricky relationship issues, deadlines, dirty laundry, late nights, early mornings, you know – adult responsibility. Tim is leaving here with many, if not all, of the skills and experience he needs to be an independent, confident, contributing member of society. His time here has been nothing short of AMAZING.

On behalf of my family and all of the families represented here today, I'd like to offer a hearty thanks to everyone here at Eastern New Mexico University in Roswell. Many of us spend time wondering if our lives will ever make a difference in the world. I'm here to report that this program is making a difference - a difference that is profound and that is changing our society. You have helped raise our own expectations of our son. I will be forever grateful for what Tim and our family are leaving here with. You are truly a blessing. Thank you.

What's next for Tim and the Harris family? Beginning next January, my wife and I are going sailing in the Bahamas and Mexico for four months with Tim. Then, in the late summer of 2009, we have plans to open a restaurant in Albuquerque called Tim's Place.

Our plan is to pair Tim with a non-disabled business partner that will be the general manager of the enterprise. Tim's role will be to meet and greet, and to interact in his own unique way with his customers.

Our vision for Tim's Place is to create something financially successful and unique. It will be a restaurant, a gathering place, a place where people from all walks of life are welcome, a place where inspiration happens, a place where hearts are warmed, a place for daily miracles. I've also heard from Tim that hugs will be on his menu. I can't wait to start my days with coffee and breakfast at Tim's Place. I'll be ordering hugs too!! I hope you'll all join us there someday.

I'd also like to mention that Tim has very serious intentions to be married some day. Our family thinks it would be a very good idea. Like everyone else, our kids deserve the chance to benefit from the companionship, connection, and love that grows in marriage. So watch out single ladies, he's serious!

So what have I learned from all of this experience I've shared? First and foremost I've learned that a strong family system is at the core of everyone's success in life. Children with and without disabilities can go far only with the support of family. Tim benefited from having one older brother and two younger brothers. He always worked hard to do what his big brother Dan could do. He also worked extra hard to never let his younger brothers Tom and John pass him up. His brothers always made sure he knew when it was his turn to do the dishes. Most importantly, they treated him like a brother – not like someone special. Dan, Tom, and John; thanks for being such great role models for Tim. I love you guys.

Parents, students, and other family members - what can you take with you today as a lesson? It really boils down this.

***Dream big and don't ever accept anyone else's limitations.***

Throughout my lifetime with Tim, each and every time that someone, including yours truly, has put forward a limiting thought or belief, Tim has simply surpassed it. So what does that mean? Dream big. Live life fully. Believe in the possibilities. Never settle for less than great.

I'd like to close today with a story from Tim's childhood. When my boys were small I used to go into their bedrooms every night to say goodnight and tuck them in.

One night, as I was at Tim's bedside I told him that lately I'd been doing a lot of thinking. "What have you been thinking about Dad?" he asked. I told him that I'd been thinking that I wanted to be more like him in my life. To love and trust people more - to stop waiting to enjoy my life.

I then asked him if he thought I could do it. He said "It's very easy Dad, I'll teach you." He then said, "Dad, every night when you're asleep in the next room with mom, your heart comes in here and loves me and my brothers. Not your mind Dad, your heart. Do you understand?"

Tim, I'm still working on it. I'm making progress. And just like you, I'll never give up. That's my promise.

Here's my message to the family and friends of today's graduates: Please help these beautiful young people on this stage to aim high and live their dreams. Answer the door when angels knock. And never, ever stop reaching for the stars.

Eastern New Mexico University - Roswell graduating class of 2008: The world is out there waiting for you. Go for it!!

**Congratulations - I Believe in You**

Thanks for allowing me to speak with you today.

**I love you all.**