

Class of 2017 told to ‘stay in the driver’s seat’ at Spring Commencement

Newest Associate Degree Nursing graduates also recognized in separate Pinning Ceremony

BAYTOWN, TX — As a capacity crowd packed with family, friends and supporters cheered and applauded from the audience, more than 630 Lee College graduates were recognized for earning associate degrees and certificates of completion at the 2017 Spring Commencement ceremonies.

“You cannot imagine how proud we are,” Pres. Dr. Dennis Brown told the graduates. “As you move forward, know that this is not the end of your journey; it is the beginning. It’s the time where you think about your next steps, and I would also ask you to remember those that will follow you. You have blazed a trail. Thank you for what you’ve accomplished, and for what you’ve done for those that will follow you because of the successes you have earned.”

In their keynote address to the Class of 2017 – which included nearly two dozen IMPACT Early College High School students receiving their associate degrees before their high school diplomas – sisters, authors, educators and entrepreneurs Tina Pennington and Mandy Williams encouraged the graduates to remember that some of the greatest blessings in life can come from confronting the most difficult and challenging situations. Pennington and Williams, better known as “Red” and “Black” respectively, learned that lesson firsthand after Red’s husband was fired from his job and she turned to her sister for help mastering the family’s finances. Black, who earned an MBA in International Finance from New York University and London Business School before retiring from the oil and gas industry at just 40 years old, assured the nervous Red – a Theater Arts graduate at Wake Forest University who became a full-time wife and mother and was initially intimidated by financial terminology like “assets and liabilities” – that the job loss and subsequent processes of learning about personal finance and rebuilding her life would be the best thing to ever happen to her.

The frank and candid messages the sisters exchanged during Red’s period of crisis formed the basis of their national bestseller, “What I Learned About Life When My Husband Got Fired!” which features practical guidance and advice about achieving financial health and a richer, more satisfying life. Initially launched by Neiman Marcus, the book has since been adapted into an educational program at KIPP Houston High School and incorporated into book study programs at more than 30 percent of Texas Department of Criminal Justice prison units. Along with financial literacy, Red and Black also emphasize the need for soft skills like critical thinking, problem solving, communication and teamwork.

“Once I started doing personal finance, realized the importance of the soft skills I already had and just stopped to think about things, I realized she was right,” Red told the Lee College graduates. “It really was the best thing for me – but more than that, it was the best thing for my daughters, and to be able to talk with students like yourselves and others we come across.”

As the first woman to race the road course at Indianapolis, Black used racing analogies to present the graduates with an essential life choice: being a passenger who lets life

control them, or being a driver who controls their own life. Remember the important corners on the track that require a steady hand, and keep the fun of the curves in perspective of the bigger picture, she said. Most of all, stay in the driver's seat instead of simply coasting along.

"Think of all the times you could have quit, all the excuses you could have made, but you kept going. You're here today and you've proved that you are strong and driven," Black said. "None of us know where our lives are going to take us. Take a deep breath, hold on to the steering wheel and throttle on."