

Remarks by Seth W. Lawry '87
Williams Annual Scholarship Luncheon
Friday, May 1, 2009

Thanks, Morty, for your kind introduction. I am slightly petrified to be speaking to all of you...this impressive assemblage of Scholarship donors and recipients, Faculty, Staff, and Special Guests. Although I much prefer to listen to a speaker rather than act as one, I am up here today because I love Williams and will forever be grateful that I stumbled upon it and spent my precious college years here. I also love Maine, and am deeply proud of my roots there. Marrying these two loves by helping deserving Maine scholars attend Williams is Cindy's and my honor and privilege and I would like to thank the many donors in this room who have inspired us by your example.

When I just spoke of how I came to Williams, I intentionally said "stumbled". It may seem like a strange, even inapt, word to describe my path to what is perennially the best liberal arts college in the country and, therefore arguably, in the world. But, like a good portion of my life thus far, it would be fairest to acknowledge the role luck played in what turned out to be a life-altering decision. So, in the hopes that some background will be useful, I'd like to share a bit of how I got to Williams in the first place, or to quote that influential alternative '80s rock star, David Byrne of the Talking Heads,... "well, how did I get here?"

I grew up in Waterville, Maine. As I entered my senior year in high school in the fall of 1982, Waterville and its surrounding communities were the home of Colby and Thomas Colleges, Hathaway Shirt Factory, three hospitals, a number of paper mills including Scott Paper and Keyes Fibre (which made Chinet plates, among other products) and a thriving downtown with stores of all types where I could get whatever I needed. With all of this and 17,000 people, it felt like a happenin' place...especially when compared with many towns that I saw traveling around to various football, basketball and baseball games.

From what little I knew about colleges, a few obvious choices came to my mind when I thought about where I might like to go and which would be

challenging for me. But, in thinking about what I wanted---a competitive, relatively small school with a broad course catalog, a low student to faculty ratio, a non-urban environment and a place where I might be able to play intercollegiate sports---- and then running searches on the primitive database system in the Waterville High guidance department, Williams College consistently came up as a match. I'd like to say that was just the beginning of a lengthy due diligence process marked by a national college tour, interviews with alumni from many colleges to get their perspectives, visits to athletic departments to see how I'd be pampered as an elite athlete...all that sort of stuff that seems to be the norm today. But, I can't say that...and not least because "elite" and "athlete" were never used in a sentence to describe me. Instead, with my search results as my basis, I visited and interviewed at Williams, re-visited again in the fall and applied...and, I got accepted early decision just before Christmas. In other words, luck was on my side.

After I was admitted, there wasn't a lengthy discussion about how my family would pay for my Williams education. I was fortunate in my family circumstances. My Dad operated a local insurance agency and my folks have always been frugal people, especially when it comes to themselves. It also helped that my brother and sister were 12 and 11 years older than I, so there were no competing educational financial needs. Affording Williams was therefore workable, predominantly because of my parents' willingness to support me in my chosen educational path, and their selflessness. My folks expected me to provide for my own spending money during the year by working summers, all of which I did back in Waterville doing primarily manual labor, which taught me a different, but equally important, set of life lessons.

Williamstown is 5 hours and 290 miles from my hometown, so you might think that I felt alone when I arrived. This was, in fact, not the case as I can proudly recount that there were 3 of us from my Waterville High class of 190 that entered as freshmen. I did, however, have a lot to learn. My first lesson was that there are 26 letters in the alphabet...hard to think that I could be accepted to Williams without knowing that, but...within the first few weeks I was good-naturedly teased about my lack of familiarity with the letter "R". Apparently, it wasn't "Baxta Hall", but rather, "Baxter Hall"; not "President Chandla", but rather, "President Chandler"....you get the picture.

The irony in all of this was that my biggest taunter was from BOSTON. My Maine accent soon faded, but my pride in my home state stayed strong.

I also had a lot to learn about scheduling. My first semester schedule, in retrospect, looks like a cruel joke played on an unsuspecting freshman...in fact, that is exactly what it was. Coming from a public high school experience where there was some latitude in course choices but little in their scheduling, I did what I was used to and opted for English...continued my Calculus work in Math....started a new language, German...and took introductory Economics, which, along with Math, seemed like it might be a possible major for me. The only problem was that my Math class was Mon/Wed/Fri at 8AM, English was Tues/Thurs at 8AM, German was EVERY DAY at 11AM and Economics was on Tuesday and FRIDAY from 230 to 4pm. In other words, I was up every day for the earliest possible classes and chose the LATEST possible class offered during the week (and, for the record, I didn't even get Morty as my Econ professor ...now, that certainly would've been worth it).

I quickly learned from my scheduling mistakes, worked on my enunciation shortcomings and made new friends, inside and outside the classroom. My four years flew by. What I recall academically is the breadth of coursework that I was able to pursue, starting with a rich Economics program and complemented by a German Studies experience that enabled me to combine true German language study with history classes, Russian literature and a semester abroad in Germany. I also remember certain wild card courses like Non-Fiction Film, for which I famously analyzed the "rockumentary", Spinal Tap. My freshman English course stands out too, primarily because of the C- I got on my third paper. I remember thinking, WOW, that is almost a D and I worked hard on that paper. But, that grade motivated me and I uncharacteristically approached Professor Reichert to discuss how I could become a better writer. This first encounter with a professor in his office impressed upon me the accessibility and genuine interest that professors here have in their students.

As I am sure many of you current students here agree, Williams also tests and enhances your work ethic. I had to grind to meet the academic goals that I set for myself. This kind of sustained effort that you learn here is something which you can draw upon for the rest of your life. One of the most satisfying compliments that I received in my work life (and they are

few and far between, I can assure you) was when an attorney I was working with said to me somewhat disgustedly at about 6am after a series of all-nighters, "Seth,.....you have.....the stamina..... of an ox" ...and then he walked out of the room. Ok, I'll admit that it's more like a backhanded compliment, but you take what you can. I credit Williams with reinforcing and advancing my work ethic by consistently stretching me and I am sure that many of you feel the same way.

Williams offers students so many opportunities to make difficult choices, often concerning two equally attractive alternatives. Some of your best decisions may buck conventional wisdom. A memorable example for me was when I was accepted into the inaugural Williams-in-Oxford program for my junior year. While this program was an unknown quantity, the prestige was obvious. But, choosing that route would have precluded a double major in German Studies and meant that I would miss my junior baseball season. So, I opted for a fall semester program in Freiburg, Germany where I was able to become fluent and returned for the spring semester where our baseball team set the then record for wins in school history. I chose the path that I deemed best for me, not the one that looked better on paper. The upshot of encountering those difficult choices is to be appropriately introspective and trust your gut. There are no bad choices at this institution.

As I have gotten older, as trite as it may sound, I have only grown to appreciate my time here more. I can draw on so many good habits developed here, remain curious about subjects that I know nothing about (one of the many benefits of pursuing the liberal arts education), draw often on the analytical skills that I developed here and attempt to make Professor Reichert proud in the clarity of my written work. Williams also offers lots of athletic outlets, intercollegiate or otherwise. My four years on the baseball team are the source of some of my most lasting memories and strongest friendships. I believe that those of you who are current students will find that there is an easy connection with most alumni. The natural beauty here is stunning and the location offers so much to do outdoors. Taconic is a true gem...even if you have never picked up a golf club, try it sometime, particularly on a fall afternoon, if only for a few holes. Finally, and most personally, of all the wonderful times that I have had here since graduating, none will ever top our wedding weekend in 1997. Cindy and I were married in Thompson Chapel ...(as a side note....when we visited a few months before to make plans, I took Cindy inside Thompson for the first time and she said,

“it’s beautiful”.... to which I responded “yeah, it really IS beautiful”...to which I got an incredulous, “have you NEVER been in here before?”...beyond that, I’ll take the Fifth). The day unfolded beautifully and was capped by Cindy entering the Purple Pub in her wedding dress after our reception on Poker Flats had broken up.

I now have lived about the same amount of time since college as when I graduated. That, in my opinion, doesn’t really make me experienced or old enough to offer the scholars here advice...but, I have snuck some in thus far and will offer just a bit more in a more direct way. Cindy and I were on campus two weekends ago and one alumni speaker credited Professor Dalzell with equating your course choices here with holding 32 golden tickets. As you go through your years here, think about those scarce golden tickets and take the courses that truly interest you, as well as a few that scare but excite you at the same time. Dare to make mistakes...not the reckless kind, but the kind that stretch you and ultimately better you. Know that you will leave here with some regrets, but try to make them small and not borne of an unwillingness or fear of tackling the unknown. When you leave, remember who helped get you here and get through here. Turn around and offer that help to others along the way. And, using the proper introspection when making key decisions here and beyond, trust your gut and be true to yourself. As Popeye famously said, “I yam what I yam”....it can take awhile to realize that, but when it happens, life becomes easier and more fulfilling. I am still learning to trust some of this advice myself.

In closing, I consider myself fortunate that I got accepted to Williams. I was doubly fortunate that my parents were able to stretch to afford this amazing education for me. It has enriched my life and opened so many doors. As the years have gone by and my appreciation for Williams has grown, it has become more difficult to accept that financial constraints might preclude a qualified Maine student from having the same good fortune that I had. That, in sum, is why Cindy and I sponsored a scholarship. It is a small way to contribute and hopefully help perpetuate Williams’ admirable need-blind admission policy, which says that applicants will be judged based on their merits, not their family’s financial circumstances. Our contribution is really just a drop in the Williams bucket. However, combined with all the other drops that have rained down from people in this room and from many, many others, the bucket starts to fill up. It is this full bucket, this sense of community and collective purpose that is the magic of Williams. Hopefully,

those of you who are scholars will decide in time to add to that bucket as well, with your talents or your resources. By doing so, you will further better this place that we all love.

Thank you.