

6 Keys for Graduates to Succeed

My son, Chris Haywood, graduated from his school as a valedictorian and began his first year of college at the Kansas City Art Institute. This letter—with six keys for success that I learned firsthand—was written to my son and all of the 2013 graduating class.

Dear Chris,

The Economic Policy Institute says that the job picture for 2013 college graduates is bleak. The Institute also predicts that your class will earn less in the next 10 to 15 years than any other graduating class. The job outlook looks grim, but you have grown up hearing how God moves in a mighty way on behalf of His people.

Your father and I have done everything we can to bring you to church, teach you the Word of God and live it in front of you. You've seen Mom and Dad call out to God when we've faced hard times, and you've seen God come through. You've seen God's faithfulness and provision in a time when everyone is saying things are going to get worse.

I wasn't a traditional high school graduate, since I took the GED exam and started college at 16. I will say that I saw God's provision, so I graduated with a good job and no college debt. My hope is that you would now fly on your own wings of faith that you've been drilled in all these years. The drills are over. Now it's your turn to fly.

God blessed your mom and dad, so we both graduated with no college debt. Today that's a miracle, since most graduates leave college with at least \$26,000 in debt. I want you to know that you have access to the same God who provided for us so we could graduate with no debt.

Of course, that meant I worked. I worked 20 to 30 hours a week, paid for everything myself and had no help from my parents. We are going to help you, but this is the time that you need to learn how to depend on God and work hard.

Here are six keys I've learned that could help you get where you need to faster:

Lesson 1: Don't be afraid of menial work. I worked as custodian while I was in college. Cleaning toilets isn't a glamorous job, but my boss put me in charge of the crew. Coordinating students and cleaning assignments was my Serving and Leading 101 class. I learned more from that experience than some of the business management workshops I've attended.

Be willing to do anything, and make an adventure out of it. You never know, but you may need favor from the person that you're working with in that menial job.

Lesson 2: You don't have to have everything figured out. When I graduated, I didn't envision having a degree in political science and journalism five years later. I wanted to be a fashion designer but didn't know how to sew. I learned the hard way that sewing is a critical skill if you want to design apparel.

I've changed careers numerous times, having started as a newspaper reporter, then an editor, scriptwriter, copywriter and now social media executive. The world is wide open to you with the Internet that didn't even exist when I was your age. I believe the Internet has created more opportunities for you to create, which is what you love to do.

Be willing to change, to learn new things all the time. Just this month, I taught myself how to edit a video. I'm constantly learning new things, experimenting and enjoying the ride.

Lesson 3: Don't be afraid to speak up. I remember when I was

18 or 19 that I was so insecure about my ideas that I wouldn't speak up when that was the reason I was invited to the meeting. I was asked to serve on the board of organizations, and at the meetings I was usually the only female and the youngest person in the room. It took a few meetings to realize that's why they asked me to serve on their board in the first place—they were trying to reach a younger audience and wanted my feedback.

Being your age presents a different viewpoint, which is desperately needed for businesses who want to market to people your age. Don't ever look down on your age, your race or your gender. God packaged you the way He wanted so you're an asset to whatever endeavor He opens the door to.

Today I was the only woman in the room again. I've been the only woman so many times that it doesn't intimidate me like it did when I was your age. You may be the only minority in the room or the youngest person. These are assets, not a disadvantage. You have something to say, and we want to hear it.

Lesson 4: Don't be afraid to apply for jobs that you may not qualify for. If you are passionate about a position and you have some of the skills required, I say go for it. I got my first job at a newspaper that didn't hire college graduates. The executive editor was so impressed that I called him and asked to meet with him that he offered me a job. No other student up to that point had ever done that to him. Sometimes sheer guts, passion and hard work will open the door for you.

Lesson 5: Go for what you love to do. If you can't get paid for what you love to do, then be willing to work for free. I volunteered for many years for several nonprofit organizations, writing public relations materials and newsletters. Those years paid off with a portfolio of sample work when I applied for public relations positions later.

Lesson 6: Stay the course of your faith. You are at the age when most Christians fall away because they are distracted or pulled away by the spirit of the world. Your faith is what got you to where you are now, and staying on that path will pay off many years down the road. The next three years will be the years that determine your future mate and your occupation, and they will set the course for the rest of your life. Set a strong foundation in Christ that will weather the storms of life.

Above all, “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31, NKJV). When you do what you do for the glory for God, He will step in with open doors, the right connections and creative ideas when you need them. You can miss those opportunities and open doors when you have a bad attitude. Demonstrate the fruit of the Holy Spirit—love, joy and peace—in your attitude, and you will attract people. People love to work with people who have are peaceful, joyful and caring.

You are not alone in your search for what you’re supposed to do with your life. God has a plan, and the exciting part is responding to Him and seeing that plan unfold. You’re going to face a lot of decisions and transition. Remember, “seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.” (Matt. 6:33, NLT).

Leilani Haywood is a Kansas City, award-winning writer and columnist. Her work has been published in the Kansas City Star, Metro Voice and other publications. When she’s not updating her status on Facebook or Twitter, she’s working on her first book. Follow her on Twitter @leilanihaywood.