

**COMMENCEMENT SPEECH BY TOM ROGERS
WILLIAM JEFFERSON CLINTON MIDDLE SCHOOL, JUNE 7, 2014**

Good morning. Congratulations, graduating class of 2014!

Principal O'Reilly has told me some impressive things about you. She says there are 218 of you culminating today. Fifty percent of you – 109 – are on the honor roll. Sixty-four of you have had perfect attendance since the sixth grade. And thirty-one of you are culminating with straight As. That's phenomenal.

I want to call out two people in particular: Omar Amador and Alejandra Campos. Omar and Alejandra, as you know, are co-valedictorians. I was a co-valedictorian when I graduated from high school, so Omar and Alejandra: I get you guys.

I am so honored to be here. Because when I look around, I see I'm surrounded by heroes. Parents, who work hard to see that their children have what it takes to succeed in life. Teachers, who go above and beyond on a daily basis to give you the top-notch education you deserve.

But most of all, I see you.

Now for all those nice things I said about you, you might be thinking, really? Me, a hero? Uh, dude, maybe you didn't notice I'm just in 8th grade. I don't wear a cape. Or a mask. Or an Iron Man suit. I can't fly. I can't lift a bus over my head. And I've never been bitten by a radioactive spider.

I just went to school. Big deal.

But I think you're all heroes. And let me tell you why.

But first, let me tell you a terrible superhero joke.

How many Batmans does it take to change a light-bulb?
Batman doesn't change light bulbs. He likes...the dark night.

That's how we tend to think of heroes – physical, big, strong, powerful. They don't let the fear of physical harm stand in their way. In the real world, we think of firefighters. Police officers. Soldiers.

But what does it mean to be a hero when you're an eighth-grader just graduating from middle school?

When I was your age, I daydreamed all the time about being a hero. Mostly it involved rescuing people. Well, to be honest: rescuing the cute girls in my class. Reagan Horchow from a burning high rise. Robin Posner from a burning car.

In my head, the whole world was full of cute girls trapped by fire and waiting for me come to the rescue. Pity the poor boys; in my daydreams, those guys were toast.

The truth is, I'm still thinking about what it means to be a hero.

Principal O'Reilly invited me here today because I wrote a book about a middle-school hero not much different from you.

My book is called *Eleven*, and it tells the story of Alex Douglas, a boy who's turning eleven on 9/11. Of course, at the beginning of the story, he doesn't know what's coming. He's just a typical kid. He likes video games but hates when his mom won't let him play; he's annoyed by his little sister, who won't keep her stuff on her side of the room; and he's furious at his dad, who won't get him a dog for his birthday.

Then his birthday comes, and things start looking up. Everybody gets sent home from school early – there's no explanation; he doesn't know why. He rescues a stray dog – a birthday gift to himself. He meets up with his friends, and they play baseball all morning. It's like a whole day of hooky for his birthday.

But halfway through the story, he finds out about the terrorist attacks in New York, the planes that crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. He realizes that's why they were sent home early from school. And then it hits him: his dad works at the World Trade Center. Now everything changes for him. Everything that seemed so important before now means nothing. And the things that were driving him crazy, like his dad – that's everything.

Suddenly, he feels very small. And very alone. Then his dog gets injured, and his little sister's tired and hungry, and an old man needs their help, and Alex's world is coming apart but he has to keep it together. Because they're all relying on him. He has to find the strength to carry his injured dog, and be kind to the old man,

and cook dinner for his sister and protect her from his fear and sing her a lullaby to put her to sleep that night as he waits to see if his dad will be coming home.

There's a real kind of heroism in that. Alex doesn't wear a cape, or spandex, or a uniform. But to me, he's a hero.

A couple of weeks ago, we lost the great poet Maya Angelou. In the many remembrances published about her, I came across this quote, which really struck me. This is what she said:

"Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest."

She's talking about an everyday kind of courage. About the hero who shows up every day at school, ready to learn. The hero who does her homework, even when it makes her brain hurt. The boy who speaks up to a bully. The girl who sits with the lonely kid at lunch.

When I was about your age, daydreaming of rescuing cute girls, I remember a time when I had a chance to be that kind of everyday hero.

And I failed.

My brother and I and our friends used to play football in our street. And there was a kid who lived up the street, named Roland. Roland was developmentally disabled. He would come out of his house when he'd hear us playing. And he ran awkwardly; his arms would kind of flap. He didn't have verbal skills, so he would just make grunting noises. And when we would see him coming, we would turn around, and run away, screaming, like he was some kind of a monster.

When my father found out he sat us down. He wasn't angry, but he understood why we would respond this way: it's easy to go with the crowd. But he also wanted us to know that just because it was easy, that didn't make it right.

So the next time we were out there playing football, Roland's door opened, and out he came. But my brother and I didn't run away. We watched as Roland came rushing towards us, with his awkward run, his arms flapping, making his noises...and sat down on the curb and watched us play. It was no big deal. He just wanted to hang out. Be part of the crowd. It made him happy.

I've tried to never forget that feeling...or that smile on Roland's face. I've tried to remember how a little courage goes a long way.

And here's the thing about courage: it's like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets.

So that's what I want to leave you with today.

Find the courage to be kind. Talk to the new girl in class who feels like an outcast. Talk to the kid who doesn't look like you.

When you're picking teams at PE, have the courage to pick the worst kid first. I guarantee you that an hour later you will not even remember the score of the game. But you will remember that kid's smile for a long time.

In a world of easy put-downs and disses and casual meanness, find the courage to show respect. To your friends. To your teachers. To your families. And most importantly, to yourself.

Find the courage to push yourself, to confront the possibility of failure. If you're shy, raise your hand in class and answer a question. If you're worried about messing up an essay, just start writing. If you're afraid of embarrassing yourself on the baseball field, just get out there and take a swing. And if you miss, laugh it off and be proud of yourself -- you won the battle just by having the courage to get out there.

Find the courage to give back to your community here in South Los Angeles.

Find the courage to stand out.

And always find the courage to try.

I leave you with the words of Maya Angelou again: "Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest."

So congratulations, class of 2014. Enjoy your graduation. Go have fun, eat cake, celebrate!

And don't forget to be a hero.