

Greetings, pleasant good morning to you all, and thank you for your warm welcome.

I truly consider it a privilege and honor to be here to share with you in this historic moment, as we celebrate the determination and accomplishments of the JumpStart Programme graduates. I would like to ask each of you in attendance to give them a round of applause. Graduates, we commend you.

I say historic because each of our graduates has the opportunity to shape history, by embracing all the good they have experienced on their journey with the JumpStart Programme and applying it to their lives, our country, even our world, in positive and productive ways.

I cannot help but look at our graduates with such excitement, such joy, because of all the promise, all the hope and the destiny that lies within them. Yet still, for me, there can be hints of sadness as well, as I think of those opportunities that I was once given, like many of them—opportunities that I am ashamed to say I did not grab onto early in life and fully appreciate. Graduates: that does not have to be your story. The thought I would like to leave with you today is: **When you are given a jump start . . . keep it. When you are given a jump start . . . keep it.**

We all have a story...Something that defines or describes (1) Who you are (2) Where you have been and (3) Where you are going. And that story is usually developed daily and shaped by family, friends, joys and hardships, and of course life experiences. Some individuals, choose to answer those questions early on in life, and when they do, life takes on an entirely different meaning. For me, at first, I ignored the importance of answering those questions, so I put off for many, many years, what it meant to be a responsible and productive individual. It's not that I could not do it, but that I did not respect the value of it at that time in my life. I totally ignored the importance of embracing the education I was blessed to receive and applying it. What that translated into was someone who thought that hanging out with friends, and seeking to be accepted by others, was more important than putting my energy and efforts into being successful. I am deeply ashamed of that.

When you are given a jump start . . . keep it.

What would you think if you saw an Olympic runner in a race, who was able to finally take the lead, but then just suddenly stopped to look at all the spectators in the stands and say, "They must be cheering for me." Or what if another runner, in a different race, who also was in the lead, s-l-o-w-e-d d-o-w-n, and began to admire the track that she was running on, the splendor of the stadium, got caught up in the flashing lights, and began to forget that she was in a race. How far would she get?

And would you expect her to win the race, let alone complete it? How long would it be before all the other runners in that race ran right past her? But yet, she had the lead, you would say, she had a good jump start . . . but she let it go.

What is a jump start, what does it mean to you? (Ask a few of the students). Thank you, I appreciate your answers. I like to think of it as a boost, not a hand out, but a **hand up**, it is something that empowers you and brings to surface your inner potential and greatness. A jump start can motivate, it can inspire, it can challenge, and it can even expose you to resources (within you) that you did not know were there. Like a car battery that is not starting a car up, when you give it a jump start, you bring out the potential energy that was inside of that car's battery all along. Then that vehicle can be driven, it has purpose and a function. It is good for something more than just sitting at the side of a road.
When you are given a jump start . . . keep it.

I received a beautiful jump start, right here in Trinidad, over 40 years ago, when my educational journey began. Several years later, I was taken to the United States to live with my mother, and that journey continued. After some time abroad, though, and I say this with deep regret, I slowly began to disregard the educational foundation I received here. Just like the runner I described to you earlier, I began to get

distracted by the track I was running on, distracted by the splendor of the stadium and got caught up in the flashing lights. **When you are given a jump start . . . keep it.** Those very distractions and the irresponsible choices I made in response to those distractions, led me to dropping out of the race altogether while many of my peers continued on. I dropped out of high school, and in effect, closed the door on the best opportunities available to me at the time. You see, I was foolish enough to think that if I wasted time, time would wait for me, after all, I was young. It did not. Time waits for no one, and opportunities do not ask for our permission to come, or to go. I wish I had the opportunities that you, our graduates, were blessed to receive through this program. I wonder how different my life would have been then, and how different it would be today. **When you are given a jump start . . . keep it.**

After dropping out of high school, it was a string of poor choices after poor choices after poor choices, until I finally realized I was not running in any race at all. I was merely existing, but I wasn't living. Are you living? Or are you existing? When you are doing your best with what you have, you are living. When you are looking to please others, you are only existing. I had all this potential in me, but I was like a dead car battery that needed a jump start. It was not until *years later*, that I was fortunate enough to meet several gifted artists that gathered weekly in an old school building, that I began

to discover that I had the potential to be a successful artist. I had always sketched and drawn, but never knew I had this artistic gift that needed to be cultivated—to be stirred up. Then, It was not until years *later*, that individuals I knew who had obtained college degrees began to speak to me about my potential, and challenge me, to go back to school and pursue higher education. It took a lot for me to do this, but with their encouragement, I dusted off the pride and ignorance that blinded me, and took the necessary steps to go back to school. I completed my high school equivalency diploma, and later would enroll into college. I worked very, very hard because I finally understood the importance of an education, and finally realized how an education can lead to one discovering, early on, their gifts, talents, strengths and abilities. Young people—each of you has strengths, each of you has a gifting and an ability that makes you unique, and when you discover it, you have the opportunity to make this world a better place. Don't let anyone, anywhere, under any circumstances, keep you from moving in to your greatness and your potential. Don't let anyone get you out of the race called success.

As I told you earlier, I dropped out of that race at 17 years old...and time and opportunity did not wait for me. I would like to ask a few of our graduates, How old do you think I was when I finally earned my first degree?. . . I was 30 years old when I earned my Associates

degree, 32 when I earned my Bachelors, and 34 when I earned my Masters degree in 2006, and each time I did so, I graduated as Valedictorian with Highest Honors. I finally was back in the race, it would seem. But there are so many struggles when you discover and develop those gifts at such a late stage, as I did. There is just so much you will miss, so much you will deprive yourself of. **When you are given a jump start . . . keep it.**

As I challenge you to consider your story—(remember the 3 elements) Who you are, Where you have been, and Where you are going—I hope you would take away from my story the truth that life is best lived when you discover your gifts early and seek to develop them as best as you can. This is when you can move into what it truly means to be a successful person. **When you are given a jump start ... keep it.**

So how do you keep the jump start given you? In Africa, the Akan (**ah** kahn) people of Ghana give their leaders the symbol: a hand with an egg. For the Akan, the purpose is to symbolize being given power (the hand) yet being trusted with the responsibility to not crush the egg. The education you have been given will empower you, graduates, it has empowered you, but with that, you must be **responsible**. I urge you to always make choices that reflect the absolute respect you have for this incredibly empowering opportunity given you (the hand), and the responsibility that is now entrusted to

your care (the egg). Every opportunity in life requires responsibility. The greater the opportunity, the greater the responsibility. The greater the opportunity, the greater the responsibility. **When you are given a jump start . . . keep it.**

To our young graduates, I want to ask you to take this moment to look around this room right now... Your jump start is reflected in the faces of the many people you see here today. We—believe—in—you. And we encourage you to always believe in yourself. Having gone through the program, you have experienced the reality of the investment of others in you, and equally important, you must now be always willing to invest in yourself. **When you are given a jump start . . . keep it.**

As you run this race of life, empowered by education, moving forward to the finish line called success, use this jump start wisely. Stay true to the good values instilled in you, Respect yourself and others faithfully, Have a sense of gratitude, Maintain your integrity, Cherish what is good, Reject what is foolish, Strive for excellence, Learn continually, Embrace change, Set goals and develop life plans, Never give up, and Hold every opportunity with the utmost level of responsibility...In doing so, you will bring honor to the work, commitments and support flowing in this room. In doing so, you will be able to finish this race without the distractions and destructions of those who let themselves be taken off course. Let that

never be your story...Who am I? Where have I been?
Where am I going?

I will conclude with an African Proverb that says, "Every morning in Africa, an antelope wakes up. It knows it must outrun the fastest lion, or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa, a lion wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the slowest antelope, or it will starve. [Young people, precious graduates] It doesn't matter whether you're the lion or an antelope – when the sun comes up, you'd better be running."

When you are given a jump start . . . keep it.

Thank you for your time and attention, and may all of life's greatness and victories be yours in abundance. Be blessed, be encouraged, and be successful.