COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
Shippensburg University
Senator Jeanne Shaheen
May 8, 2010

President Ruud, members of the faculty, honored graduates, family and friends. I'm delighted to be here this afternoon to celebrate the accomplishments of the Class of 2010.

This is a day you all worked very hard to reach. You should be proud of what you have accomplished. But no great accomplishment is achieved alone. Here with us this morning are your families, your friends, your professors – the people who supported you when you stumbled and encouraged you to keep going. Today is their accomplishment as well.

I find commencement addresses are among the most challenging speeches to give. As the speaker, I always want to say something profound and inspirational on this momentous occasion. But, as a former student I can tell you that I don't remember any of the speakers at my own graduations. So today I'll follow the advice of Franklin Roosevelt, "Be brief be sincere be seated."

It's great to be back at Shippensburg, I have wonderful memories of my years here, some of which I probably shouldn't share in public….But, the lessons I learned here, and the people I met, have had a profound impact on the direction of my life and they sparked my career in politics.

But when I arrived here as a freshman in 1965, Shippensburg was a very different place. There was still a student dress code; freshmen women had a 9pm curfew during the week; and coed visitation was strictly prohibited even for those living in off-campus housing. There was no CUB—our student center was the Raider Room in Old Main—and construction of this part of campus had not yet begun.

Just as Ship has changed since that time, the world you face is vastly different than the one I found when I graduated from college in 1969.

In 1969 the majority of women didn't enter the workforce fulltime. Most men faced a military draft upon graduation.

In 1969 the war was raging in Vietnam and 18-year-olds didn't have the right to vote.

In 1969 there were no personal computers, no blackberries, no iphones and no internet.

In 1969 there was no YouTube, Twitter or Facebook. (Makes you wonder how we ever got along!)

But one thing that hasn't changed since I graduated in 1969 is the value of a college education. As you enter the professional world, technology is revolutionizing the way we live and work. You are competing in the global economy where a college degree is critical to your future success. You can rest assured that whatever your future may hold, Shippensburg University has prepared you well.

But getting a good education isn't just about getting ahead. Your education has equipped you with the skills you need to get a good job, but the world that awaits requires that you be more than a career professional. You should also be a citizen of your community.

The Class of 2010 has already proven itself up to the challenge with its extraordinary record of community service. Service hours have increased every year since this class enrolled at Ship, culminating with a total of 21,409 hours of service last year, and I'm told you'll probably surpass this year.

In the Ship to Ship Mentoring Program you worked with at-risk high school students to encourage them to succeed in school. You organized and ran your own Relay for Life to raise money for the American Cancer Society. You designed a curriculum to teach English and provide technology training for children in the Dominican Republic. You've volunteered for such causes as the Special Olympics, Toys for Tots, Adopt-A-Highway, and Habitat for Humanity. As you've experienced, community service means something different to everyone. But what's always true about service is that it means the world to the people who are on the receiving end of that support.

But, as important as community service is to making a difference in our world (And I do believe it makes a difference), I'm here today to urge you to take your community service to another level and to consider engaging in politics and public service.

For thirty years after 18-year-olds got the right to vote in their first presidential election in 1972, we saw a steady decline in the political involvement of young people. Young people have had a negative perception of politics and political engagement. They've seen politics as too divisive and not relevant to their lives.

The implications for a free society of generations of young people turned off to politics and public service are potentially devastating. The importance of civic engagement is a responsibility we must all share and pass on to the next generation if our democracy is to remain strong.

The good news is that in the last three election cycles – 2004, 2006 and particularly 2008 – we've seen a renewed interest in the political process on the part of young people. The events of September 11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina, and the current recession (the effects of which some of you may unfortunately be feeling in your current job search) these events have made politics more relevant to your generation. The question is how we sustain and build on that increased level of interest. How do we show the very real difference the political process can make in the lives of people?

I remember, as a college student, when I first realized why political engagement is so important. It was my senior year and, like most students at the time, I was opposed to the war in Vietnam. I recall vividly the conversation with my favorite political science professor, Richard Beckner. I was expressing my frustration that President Nixon was not listening to the tens-of-thousands of people protesting in the streets against the war. Professor Beckner responded that protests and marches would'nt change the policies of the government. He said the government's policies would change only when a majority of voters wanted change and expressed that desire through the power of the ballot box. He also told me that if I wanted to be part of causing change, I should work through the system, not against it.

As I thought about that conversation before coming to speak today, I was struck by how much the excessive fervor of some on the left in the late sixties resembles that of some on the right in America today. Then and now, some people have stepped over the line, crippling the ability to have an open, thoughtful, and constructive debate about the challenges we face in this country.

The importance of civil discourse in our society cannot be overstated. Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly are two of the bedrock values

that make our democracy great. But the debate needs to civil. We need to respect each other's viewpoints. And, as Dr. Beckner advised when I was here so long ago, we need to settle our disagreements in the voting booth.

America only works if we make it work. All Americans are blessed with the rights and responsibilities of self-government. For those like you who've had the opportunity to attend a first rate college like Shippensburg University, you're called on to do even more.

So as you start the next phase of your lives, don't be afraid to get involved in politics. This country needs your passion, your energy and your idealism. If you see something that needs fixing, help fix it. Vote. Work for a candidate who shares your values. Run for office. You won't win every battle, but the only way you'll truly lose is if you choose to sit on the sidelines.

Congratulations to you and all the people who helped you along the way--your parents and families, your friends and your professors.

The opportunities that await you are boundless. Make the most of it. I wish each of you the best of luck. Thank you for allowing me to share this very special day.