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USU Jon M. Huntsman School of Business
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By Steve Eaton

One of the best known alums of the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business, Charlie Denson, told USU graduates to be curious, keep their options open, follow their passion, and change the world.

Mr. Denson, '78, marketing, is the president of the Nike Brand and was the commencement speaker for Utah State University the morning of May 4. The president of Bangkok University, Mathana Santiwat, spoke at the Huntsman School's convocation ceremony the afternoon of May 4.

They both received honorary doctorates during USU's 126th Commencement Ceremony along with: Samuel Alba, retired United States Magistrate Judge for the District of Utah; and Orrin Hatch, Utah senator and the most senior Republican in the United States Senate. USU graduates for the class of 2013 earned 3,633 bachelor's degrees, 821 master's degrees, 93 doctorates, and five became educational specialists. There were more than 800 Huntsman students who graduated this spring.

Mr. Denson, who is responsible for leading the strategy of the world's most distinctive, authentic, and connected brand in sports, told the students that they will never have more freedom than they have right now to make choices about their life. He suggested they not be too specific in planning out their lives at this point. He said they should stay open to new ideas and options.
“I have been fortunate enough to have traveled from the jungles of Africa, to the urban jungles of the world's biggest cities,” he said. “I have seen hope in the faces of children living in conditions that you would find hard to imagine. I can assure you the human spirit is alive and well. Find a way to tap into it and you'll learn a lot about yourself. You're smart — smarter than any generation before you. But you're not wise, not yet. Wisdom will come with time, so respect it.”

Mr. Denson talked about his vocational career and admitted he turned down the first chance he had to join Nike when it was a “small company, run by a bunch of ex-jocks.” Even when he did join the company, he planned to only stay for five years and then go get a “real job.”

“I can now honestly say I never had to go get that real job, and the career thing — it's turned out okay,” he said. “Thirty four years later I have lived and traveled all over the world, been to every major sporting event there is, met and worked with some of the smartest, most creative people on the planet. I've met with presidents, prime ministers, and world leaders, and call some of the greatest athletes of our time close friends. I have a pretty good gig, to say the least.”

He asked the graduates to lead the next “evolution” of the earth.

“I hope that you want to change the world,” he said, “Make it a better place. We can't continue the way we have. We're running out of natural resources, we're altering ecosystems, and slowly destroying our planet. Our planet is big, but it's not infinite. It's not about using less. It's about doing things differently. That's where you come in. Look for new ways to create things, new ways to use things, different ways to dispose of things. Our planet has its limits, but limits create opportunities to innovate, to go to a different place.”

President Santiwat came on a scholarship from Bangkok College to Utah State University in 1976, where she completed a master's in accounting degree. At the Huntsman Convocation Saturday afternoon she talked of the four pillars of the Huntsman School: global vision, analytical rigor, entrepreneurial spirit, and ethical leadership.

She said a focus on entrepreneurial thinking can transform someone from within.
“Once fully internalized, this kind of (entrepreneurial) spirit readily encourages you to give your best to everything you are committed to,” she said.

She called the ethical leadership pillar a “precious gem.”

“Leadership is not always the same thing as leader, and we all know that anyone can have leadership although they may not have a position,” she said. “To lead is to serve, as wise men say.”

She said that Bangkok University shares a vision with the Huntsman School when it comes to its four pillars and encouraged Huntsman students to become life-long learners, with a global vision, and to be ethical, happy leaders.

Dean Douglas D. Anderson said Huntsman faculty members encourage students to exemplify the four pillars.

“We like to encourage our students to learn as much as they can from what we call ‘outside the classroom’ experiences, as they do from inside the classroom, and so many faculty members are there with our students every step of the way, spending countless hours mentoring them for academic competitions, leading career exploration trips, and global learning experiences,” he said.

Dean Anderson quoted from the song “Forty Years On,” which is sung by the students and alumni of the Harrow School, the London school for boys, whose most famous graduate is Winston Churchill.

Forty years on, when afar and asunder Parted are those who are singing today. When you look back, and forgetfully wonder What you were like in your work and your play. Then, it may be, there will often come o’er you, Glimpses of notes like the catch of a song … How will it seem to you, forty years on?

He told the students that it has been 40 years since he graduated and warned them that time would fly.

“The Harrow song asks us to reflect from the point of view of the future back on our experience today,” he said. “Are we using our time wisely and well? Are we devoting our energies to things that matter most?”

Huntsman Valedictorian Zach Maxfield compared USU to “the loveable uncle that stays out of the family fights, who all the cousins love to hang out with, and has the most fun while still being surprisingly smart.”

He said USU draws a certain type of person to the school.

“I think that this is what differentiates us the most,” he said. “It is this unique character that I’ve loved being a part of. It makes the school what it is.”
He thanked the teachers, professors, business leaders, entrepreneurs, and students who he said made his educational experience so valuable.

“I’d like to think I can speak for most of the students when I say the whole Utah State experience has been one of the best times in my life,” he said.

At the Graduate Commencement and Hooding Ceremony on May 3, Mark McLellan, vice president for research and dean of the School of Graduate Studies encouraged students to succeed and choose their own path. More than 1,000 Utah State graduate students completed their programs this year.

“We believe that you can win and create that future path for all of us,” he said. “Now go and make it happen and when someone says it can’t be done, you just laugh in their face because anything is possible when you believe.”

In the Undergraduate Commencement Ceremony President Stan Albrecht said that there are now nearly 30,000 students at USU, compared to 137 some 125 years ago. He said USU conducts its teaching, research, and outreach programs in 629 buildings and that the campus now draws students from 50 states and 82 foreign countries.