Commencement Address by Al Stroucken, Chairman & CEO of Owens-Illinois, Inc.
For the graduates of the University of Toledo College of Engineering
May 5, 2012

Make a Difference

Thank you, Dean Nagi. And greetings to all of you here this afternoon: distinguished faculty, parents, families and friends of today’s graduates and, of course, to you, the 217 members of the class of 2012. It’s a great honor for me to share this special day with you. All of you have a great deal to be proud of.

You are graduating from a university with a highly recognized engineering college -- so you can feel confident in the quality of the education you have received. You have achieved, and in some cases, excelled in your core academics. It has required a great deal of time and a lot of hard work to get here. The university has successfully made you into problem solvers, a skill that will serve you well in the years to come. Many of you have demonstrated an entrepreneurial drive.

And you have also exhibited something that is even more valuable as you venture into the working world: you have shown an ability to work in teams, to work collaboratively. Because by working in teams, you can multiply your leverage and capabilities. It is working with others that takes away the fear of the unknown or the fear of failure. With others, you can tackle with confidence issues outside of your area of expertise.

Rather than celebrating an end, today should mark the celebration of a beginning. The beginning of your career path; the beginning of applying
what you have learned; the beginning of combining creativity with the
discipline of science; the beginning of making a difference. Making a
difference is what motivates people -- keeps people engaged and allows
individuals and groups to achieve what hitherto was considered impossible
or unachievable.

Some of you have already started on this path. I heard, for instance, that
some of you were part of a UT team of student engineers who went to the
tiny village of La Barranca in southern Honduras to help villagers improve
the quality of their water supply, which posed a serious health risk.
Residents apparently got their water either from a local farmer who gave
priority to his cattle or from shallow wells filled indirectly from a nearby river.

The UT team proposed a riverbank filtration system coupled with chlorine
disinfection as an inexpensive and sustainable water-treatment solution.
That idea won the team an award at an Environmental Protection Agency
competition. All of you can be very proud of that accomplishment, knowing
what a difference it is making to the people in that village, and likely many
others as the EPA helps replicate it around the region.

Now you may ask why a guy who runs a bottle company is talking to a
graduating engineering class. If you have spent four years in Toledo, you
have probably come across O-I, either through our people, our community
outreach activities, or through the products we make.
O-I is the world’s largest supplier of glass packaging. We make bottles and
jars, including the bottles for many brands you know. I am guessing that
some of you have come in contact with Miller, Miller Lite, Blue Moon, and
Sierra Nevada, to name a few. In addition to beer, wine and spirits, we also supply bottles for many juices and other non-alcoholic drinks, such as Starbucks’ Frappuccino drinks. So maybe others know us better through those.

The reason I’m here is that O-I has engineering to thank for shaping our leadership role in the glass industry. It is engineering that led our journey to becoming the leading glass container manufacturer in the world; and it is engineering that keeps us there. But sometimes success can be your worst enemy. Many times, success breeds the false conviction that nobody is or could ever be better. You think you just have to keep doing whatever you’ve done up until now, and you’ll forever remain the leader.

Not true.

This is exactly the point where you lose your competitive edge as a company -- and -- as an individual. This is particularly true in a discipline like engineering, where you should be striving constantly for the new, the improved, the better. I can’t tell you how many times I have seen very experienced engineers or other highly trained individuals become trapped in the prison of what I call empirical engineering -- doing things by rote. They see a problem, know they’ve solved the same problem or something similar before, and they fix it. Of course this can be helpful much of the time, but if it becomes the only way they address issues, they become static. They lose their ability to look at problems differently, and they lose their edge.
So when we look for people to join O-I, we look for individuals who, at a minimum, have the table stakes, such as an engineering degree. But beyond that, we look for drive, a willingness to take calculated risk, to search for better solutions. We look for a hunger to succeed and an ability to work with and through others.

When we talk about the five characteristics that describe our company they are: change, renewal, creativity, innovation and passion. Those are the words that define us. We look for that in the people who join the O-I family. Clearly the education you receive from the University of Toledo fits well in the O-I value system. I know that not just because UT is located around the corner, but because we have a number of UT grads in our leadership ranks.

Our vice president of global product innovation, Mike Lonsway, is a UT engineering school graduate. And our director of technical training for North America, Steve Gabel, received a mechanical engineering degree from here.

We’ve hired at least 15 or so engineering grads from UT over the last five years. But we’ve also hired more than 70 engineering grads in Lima, Peru, and dozens more almost every year in China, France, Italy, Switzerland and so on.

I understand that two people in this class have already accepted positions with O-I. They are Ahmad Wassel, an electrical engineering technology major, and Mark Kolkemeyer, a mechanical engineering technology major. We look forward to welcoming you to O-I.
So up until now, I’ve talked about the skills you will need to be successful in the working world. But what about your competition? Who are they? Your future competition are people who come from totally different backgrounds and value systems and may be driven by motivators that may seem alien to you.

For many in Latin America, Asia and Africa, for instance, the road to a college education is long and intensely competitive. Graduates in those countries see their degrees as a key to their future, something that will allow them to achieve an income level or a standard of living that significantly exceeds the standard of living they experienced growing up.

In many European countries and here in North America many graduates today don’t know whether they will even be able to achieve the same standard of living they enjoyed growing up. That creates a huge differentiator in motivation and a hunger to succeed.

What is it you can do to make a difference? Your education and your connections may open the first few doors for you, but after that, it’s up to you.

As you set forth in your engineering careers, I encourage you to look broadly at the possibilities you have to make a difference, to solve problems, make plans, and improve processes and designs. In the future, you will be forming and forging everything from the world’s largest man-made structures to our tiniest electronic devices. You’ll engineer every
aspect of our lives. You'll sustain our local environments and ensure that our planet not only survives, but thrives. You will deal with complexities we can’t comprehend today. You’ll create new processes, improve on old ones, and you will challenge the status quo.

And I hope that some of you will do this globally, as the personal development that one experiences in dealing with people from other countries and other cultures is unmatchable.

As you sit here today, it’s undoubtedly difficult to think about tomorrow, let alone 2020 and beyond. But look at the opportunities that await you -- this is the most exciting period in human history for engineering and science. And one of the best things is that it is virtually impossible to predict or even imagine where you will be in this future. Who knows what it will be? What new breakthrough may you work on? What change will you enable? How many people will be touched by your work? It may be just a handful or an entire population, depending on the path you take, but in any case, you will have the chance to make a difference.

Making a difference has been both my personal and professional goal my entire life. I was born in the Netherlands after World War II, the youngest in a large family that had been liberated by British troops from a labor camp in Germany. All of my brothers were coal miners; those were the only well-paying jobs available in post-war Europe. Going to college was not even a remote consideration for any of us, but my brothers were determined to keep me out of the mines -- against my will, I have to say.
So I joined the army at a very early age and after that, at age 18, I went to Germany as a guest worker and unloaded fruits and vegetables from railroad cars. The owner of the company took a liking to me and gave me the opportunity to work in many different functions of his company in return for very long working hours.

A couple of years later, I was getting restless and heard that Bayer, the chemical and pharmaceutical giant, was looking for people who were willing to spend their entire careers abroad. My career assignments at Bayer were focused primarily in Germany and the United States, but my work took me all over the world. I left Bayer as an executive vice president back in Germany -- about 30 years after I started.

From there I went to Minneapolis as the CEO of a $1 1/2 billion chemical company, and five years ago I came to O-I as CEO. I never did attend university, but I made up for that by learning everything I could from the people around me, above me, across from me, below me . . . . and I read. I read and I read and I read.

As graduates you are undoubtedly getting a lot of advice from a lot of people, so let me add to the pile… The advice I want to give to you is the same advice I gave to myself decades ago – and that is to strive to make a difference.

First, set high goals -- long term and short term. Ours is a society of convenience and instant gratification. You’ll need to look at your careers differently to be successful. Sometimes it will be blood, sweat and tears
that will get you to the next step. Other times you may get lucky. But you can be very sure that you won’t be able to capitalize on any opportunity if you aren’t out there working every angle of the situation.

It was Albert Einstein who said, “If you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal, not to people or things.”

Second, Read. Read a lot! You will generate intellectual capital that will help you solve all kinds of problems, and will broaden your thinking well beyond your current state.

And lastly, be self-aware. Technology has given you opportunities and access that was unthinkable in my youth, but despite all that, these fundamentals still hold true: Take the time to reflect and to understand who you are as an individual – what motivates you, how you think, how you process information, how your behavior is interpreted by others. We can’t teach you this. You have to teach yourself. But it is perhaps the most valuable knowledge you will have as you go forth in the world.

Know your strengths and your weaknesses. Take advantage of the first and work on the second. Accept that others, many others, are smarter than you. Make them your allies. Get them to share your objective and they will make their smarts and their intellect available to you.

I know what an exciting time this is for you. I remember well the enthusiasm, and anxiety, my own sons had when they graduated from university. For many of you, this will be the first time in your lives when the
next step is unknown. This will be exciting for some and scary for others. Regardless of whether it takes you a week or a year to figure out the next phase, I am confident you will focus on making a difference.

But tackling the world can wait until tomorrow. For today, please celebrate your accomplishments with your friends, family and loved ones. And accept my most heartfelt congratulations and best wishes for your futures. Thank you.

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