



Hon. Kevin Bernard

19th Convocation Exercises Keynote Address – July 17, 2022

Eight years ago, I sat where you sit today, listening to another keynote address. I'm pretty sure I felt a lot of the things you do – fatigue, relief, happiness, pride, uncertainty, excitement, a little confusion and fear. I felt this weight off my shoulders as I received my Master's Degree in Business Administration from this prestigious institution, but it was of course replaced by another weight – what happens next? What do I do with this Degree? How do I use all this information now crammed in my head? How do I apply what I have learned – not only the information but the ability to analyse and process and reason? How do I change my little corner of the world?

I didn't have the answer then. I'm sure many of you don't. Eight years later I still don't have all the answers, because every time I think I've got it figured out, there are new questions, new challenges. Life deals us curve balls every single day. That's just the way it is.

I'll get back to those curve balls, but first the message. I decided that I would not stand here today and deal in rhetorical flourishes. I'm known more for straight talking than for talking pretty. And let's be honest. We've all listened to plenty of speeches, but how many of them really stay with us? You may not agree with everything I say here. You may not like everything I say. But I am hoping some of it stays with you, because I am talking from my heart.

How do you contribute to national development in post-pandemic Belize? Let's forget the pandemic for a moment, because I know we're all sick of talking and living Covid. So, how do you graduates contribute to national development in Belize?

First, let's talk challenges to national development. This is where I should go on and on about poverty, crime, the economy, health, education, climate change – all those forever challenges which come from being a developing country at a time when developed, first-world countries are facing collapse. But I will digress, deliberately.

For me, the biggest challenge to national development is us. It's sad, but true. All of us. You and me. Our friends, our family, our peers, the people on the street, in our communities, people we don't know and people we know. We are our own worst enemies, and our country's worst enemies.

You disagree? Scroll Facebook on any given day. For every positive post, there are 100 negative – more than that. We are a talented people for sure. But you know what I find to be our greatest talent? Tearing down others. Post an inspirational quote on Facebook or Instagram. Watch how many comments and likes you get. Post something negative and watch how many comments and likes you get. It's incredible. A while back there was an incredible initiative on Facebook – Buy and Sell. Truly innovative. But now, you are more likely to find nudes or somebody posting the woman cheating with their man, or man cheating with their woman on Buy and Sell. Positivity isn't exciting. Post a fight between two young schoolgirls – now, that is exciting. Show a young girl in skimpy attire – hell yes, let's share and share and share. Got some beef with somebody? Let's blast them on Facebook for the whole world to see. Went to a restaurant and the service wasn't what you expected? Let's put them on Facebook, with pictures.

And it crosses every spectrum. It's not only social media, though I find that to now be a truly horrific representation of how we think. KTV – let's be cruel and post the most hurtful comments. Pageants – let's do it. You know what I'm talking about. We feel this entitlement to hurt and belittle and demean others for our own enjoyment. We don't care about how they feel, or how their families feel reading those comments. Means nothing to us.

Negativity is the order of the day. Quite frankly, we have lost our humanness – our empathy. We've seen the videos of mentally ill people forced to perform sexual acts for entertainment.

You know the one that got to me? When the BDF soldier attacked a man on a median and literally kicked him to death. There were a lot of videos of that happening. Not one person tried to help. I say it again. We have lost some critical thing that makes us human.

I don't even want to get into the negativity that has gotten into governance. Build 200 homes for poor families, and 95% of the comments will be negative. Why only 200? Why not 500 or 10,000? Interestingly, the families who have gotten those homes are literally overwhelmed with joy. But the people commenting don't care. We are no longer happy with the good fortune of others. We must tear down. We must destroy. We must divide.

I could go on and on. I could talk about civic pride, where every single week personnel must be picking up garbage from the same stretches of highway, because we don't care. We feel it's okay to just throw our garbage anywhere.

I'm here talking about it and I'm getting frustrated. Because I can't see a light at the end of this tunnel. I can't see our mentality changing at all. I can't see us coming together as one people, putting our differences aside to simply become human – caring for each other, supporting each other, being patient, not judging, not harming.

So – you ask how you can play a role in our national development? It's simple. Be constructive, and never destructive. I mean absolutely no offense to this institution or to your amazing achievement when I say that your roles in our national development have less to do with your degrees, and more to do with your mindset.

Do you leave here today, and contribute to the general negativity and lack of humanity that seem to characterize us more and more lately? Or do you all, individually, understand that there cannot be and will not be any meaningful national development until we each find it in ourselves to be better?

The government can build parks that people destroy. We can build roads that people use as garbage dumps. We can build classrooms which are used as sets for students fighting, or even having sex. We can do everything a government should do. But without the individual effort of each and every one of you, it will mean nothing.

My message cannot end on a sour note, while I do not want you to forget or think I was being fascious with all I just said, I think it is just as important to know that I am where I am because I refused to join in this cult of condemnation. For sure I could have, for I have spent a large part of my life being look down at "literally". If I were to tell you about the many times I was told I was too short, not Latino enough to be a successful Orange Walk politician, we would be here for many more hours. I chose not to let these people get into my head. Instead I surrounded myself with people who taught me how to be a better person, how to laugh at myself and how to get back up when I fell down.

You can't stop the people who want to drag you down or keep you feeling that the only way to be good is to think of others as bad but u can change that about yourself and let your life be the Good example.

Every good example is how we will build a better Belize.

Every good plan that includes you being less selfish, more caring and work industrious is a part of developing our nation.

This is how we build Build Belize. This is the most effective development strategy I can impart in 15 minutes.

Let me say this ...

I am so proud of each and every one of you, and what you have achieved.
Please join those who want to be the positive change we so desperately need.
This institution has given you the tools you need to be builders.
You are here because you have what it takes.
So go out and make us all proud.

Thank you