

Commissioner Julie Brill
Columbia High School Hall of Fame Ceremony
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The Five Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me In High School

Good morning, and thank you to ____ for inviting me here to speak today and for this honor. I never imagined that when I returned to high school, it would be because I was entering the hall of fame!

As David mentioned, before I came to the Federal Trade Commission I worked in state law enforcement, focusing on consumer protection and competition issues. I protected consumers from scams in the market place, ensured that their personal information would be more secure, fought against false advertising and for open and innovative market. And I had a lot of fun while I was helping consumers who couldn't help themselves.

One of the things I'm often asked is "how did you get to become a Commissioner of the Federal Trade Commission?" I didn't land at the Federal Trade Commission because I worked on Wall Street or at a large corporate law firm. I didn't get to Washington because of political connections, or because I am wealthy and gave a lot of money to campaigns. I assure you, that's not me.

I thought today I might share with you five bits of wisdom. These aren't the five best ways to get into college or the five ways to become a millionaire. Sorry to disappoint. Rather, these are the five bits of wisdom I wish someone had told me when I was in high school to get me ready to answer a call thirty years down the road from the President of the United States..

1. Being a dork in high school is actually kind of cool.

When I was in high school, I wasn't too concerned about my "ultimate career goals." I didn't have a two year plan, let alone a ten year plan! I was too busy with my favorite activities: acting and writing. I loved the school musicals and the Parnassian Society, and also had a great time writing and editing articles for the Columbian. Get involved in things you love, even if you have trouble figuring out how they might relate to the rest of your life. It is impossible to predict what will help you down the road, and besides, you'll have more fun.

2. Do something unexpected.

Sometimes you don't know when doing something different will open a door to your future. When I was in law school, I made a very unconventional decision. I took a year off to go to Mexico to learn Spanish and help Guatemalan refugees. I loved law school, but I missed working directly with people. Taking that year off was one of the best decisions I made. It renewed my commitment to public service. When I returned to the United States to finish my studies, I was focused and knew what direction I was going in. Sometimes you have to get off the path you are on in order to find your way.

3. What you put on Facebook may still be there in thirty years.

Thirty years ago, a Tweet was a sound a bird made, the Cloud was something up in the sky, 4G was a parking spot, Applications were what you sent to colleges, and skype was a typo. I don't have to tell all of you how fast technology is changing today. You are digital natives, with more tech savvy in just one of your digits than I have in my entire body. But while there are a lot of cool apps and programs out there, it's important to keep in mind how to use them wisely.

Back when I was in high school, our teachers and parents told us "don't do anything stupid". Back then, it meant: Don't drink and drive; don't do drugs. And that is still important. But there are others way you can hurt your future. High school is a time to be social. But all of you are working hard to graduate, go to college and pursue your dreams. Be as aware of your online reputation as you are of your reputation here in these halls. Don't hurt your chances for your dream college or that great job because you mistakenly put a bad picture up on Facebook.

4. It's not always about winning. It's how you play the game.

I'm a huge sports fan. And yes, winning is important. But how you play the game is equally important. Leading a life of integrity and being a person of character really is part of leading the good life. You want to be remembered for your character, not just for coming out on top.

Part of leading the good life is to find ways to help people. Look around you and you'll discover problems that need fixing. Whether it is helping at a food kitchen, developing a cure to cancer, or finding a way to connect kids in Africa to learning centers here in the US, focus on helping others. You will be much more likely to do well by doing good, and in the meantime, you will have helped people who really need the help.

5. Keep yourself ready to answer the call from the President.

There are some times when you really need to answer the phone. And when it's the President on the other line asking to appoint you to a position, that's definitely a call you want to be in a position to take.

Okay, it may not be the President on the other end. But at some point, you will be called on to serve others: your family, your neighborhood, your school, your community, or maybe your country. Answer that call. But most importantly, prepare for that call. Make yourself the best person you can be, and then you'll be ready to answer it. And you'll be in a great position to do good for others.