Representative Noem. President Wilson. Students and guests. Good afternoon. There are many topics one could talk about to you today. How to get into college. Raising a family one day. Finishing high school. Volunteering. All of these are important topics that matter. Really matter.

Instead I am going to talk for the next 20 or so minutes about a word we over use, misunderstand, but all believe in – LEADERSHIP.

In these 20 minutes I am not going to define leadership. I am not going to even try. Instead, you are. I am going to ask you to define leadership. In doing so I am going to share with you a couple of stories and ask you to instead draw your own conclusions and apply it to your life and what you envision for yourself. Sort of like an advanced class in college.

In your mind (work with me here), are you a leader? In your friends eyes, are you a leader? In your families eyes, are you a leader? Regardless of what you thought to those three questions, what does it mean anyway? Let’s break this down.

I am a university president. Some would think that makes me a leader, but I didn’t just wake up one day and say, “Today I will be a university president.” It actually started years ago, with friends and co-workers, defining how we each wanted to make a difference on this earth.

Who is the CEO of Walmart? The pastor of your church. The Congresswoman for South Dakota? The person you see when ill? The teacher at your school? What do they all have in common? They are all college graduates. They are all college graduates that have accepted societies challenge and obligation to make the world a much better place. If the world were just 100 people; one out of that 100 would have earned a college degree. By default that makes those with college degrees some of the smartest people on the planet. That’s right. It makes them the smartest people on the planet. The ones entrusted to do some amazing things. To lead in their communities. Let’s look at this differently. Who will discover the next energy source for the world? Probably a college graduate. Who will find new ways to filter and/or preserve the earth’s fresh water? A college graduate. Who will inspire you in the classroom, help out when you are ill, or find the cure for AIDS? A college graduate. Society expects great things from college graduates – but leadership goes well beyond those that just finished a degree. In fact, in may have nothing to do with it at times.

Each of you answered the question if you were a leader and the truth is you all are and each of you will make some difference in your community. Whether you go to college, join the military and then go to college, or find some other profession, you each will make some difference in your community.
Rabbits

My late Grandmother used to say that one could learn a lot from a story. She was an amazing story teller, and sitting and listening to her I learned many things about life and work. Allow me to tell you a story about RABBITS. A story that I hope illustrates the greatness of leadership and play.

<Talk about rabbit project>

On our campuses there are many other David’s. You just do not know it. Certainly not all of us can be so ingenious to genetically create an animal to breed in a famine country. But let’s explore his success. Many people contributed to it. His teachers. His friends. His faculty. His colleagues. His parents. Many contributed. So while we may not be David, we may have contributed to helping him become all that he has become through our work. In this room, right now, many of you could be David – or you might be the one that inspires a future David.

Was David a leader? Why? Why not? Because he chased rabbits or because he applied a childhood activity to a world problem? Is he a leader because he went to college or because he tried to make some small difference in his community or on this earth? Save these thoughts as I share with you another story about a bus driver. Yes, a bus driver.

Bus Driver

Many of us are not as familiar with a city bus driver. Maybe a school bus driver, which is similar, but not a city bus driver. A city bus driver is constantly surrounded by strangers in an urban environment. They are also surrounded by traffic, noise, people in a hurry, and are trying to stay on schedule. Like the school bus driver, the city bus driver impacts people daily. This story is about a female bus driver. To my knowledge, this person, let’s call her Tonja, was the smartest person I knew. She read faster than everyone – easily going through books in a week. She self-taught herself Russian and was learning Mandarin. She was smart. Very smart. She was also a rebel. The type of person that followed her own path or didn’t want the structure of college or the military.

Tonja found work in her community, made a small living, met a wonderful man fell in love, and was married young. This was good for her. Trust me, this story is a good story. Over the next year she and her husband made ends meet and lived just fine. Then they decided to have a child. A boy was born and he was a wonderful boy. He smiled a lot. He laughed a lot. He cried a little. He ate a lot. He was just a joy to be around. I know. I babysat Ian.

Tonja later changed jobs and started driving a city bus. This was a good position, paid fairly well, had benefits, and was very stable work. She really liked this job because of the routine. She would start her route in the morning and see the same people going to work daily. Some were nice. Some were not. Her goal was to get her passengers safely to their destination and to greet each person with a genuine, positive smile each day.
Have you ever walked into a place and was greeted with a huge smile that just made you feel great? That was what my sister, Tonja, attempted to do each day. Today she still works for the city bus company and her son, my nephew, is grown and making his own living. Both are just doing fine.

Was Tonja a leader? Why or why not? I didn’t give you much to go on – but then again, I gave you a lot to think about. Unlike David, Tonja didn’t work in a famine country. Then again, she may have just as easily brightened David’s day enabling him to make these discoveries. She may not have been the CEO, but she had goals that impacted many people – all people, from the CEO to the high school student taking the bus to school. Let’s not forget she raised an amazing son, and through her gifts, he is thriving and making a positive difference as a mechanic today. She also inspired an older brother to knock on higher education’s door, enter it, and leave that door open for many other first-timers (like me) to enter higher education.

I share these two stories to cause you to profoundly think how we each are connected to each other and how each of us can make a small difference each day – a difference that may lead to something greater tomorrow.

So, I ask – who is the leader and why? How are they both making a difference and contributing to society? How has each demonstrated leadership?

Closing

Let me close with asking you to remember four (4) words. I started these remarks with you standing up and yelling Representative Noem. I end with asking you remembering four words: Genuine, Integrity, Conviction, and Perseverance.

Today you heard me tell you two stories about two different people. I said to you I would not define leadership, but instead ask you to think how these individuals have made differences for others. The two stories I shared have many things in common, but I am choosing to highlight four things they had in common and four things I never want you to forget. No matter what you do, where you live, where you go to college – or not, or who you speak to daily – always remember to be genuine. Your reputation matters and your kindness matters. You have a choice every day – Choose to be true and sincere by leading others through inspiration. Put another way, represent the best in humanity by being genuine and sincere with others in true South Dakota fashion.

#2. Have integrity. Again, your reputation matters. Your integrity, your raw commitment to truth and honesty, and having a pure sense of honesty in your heart and soul will guide you as a leader. Your parents didn’t raise any fools. You know when others are telling you the truth. Be that person to others. Be the one others can believe in and others can trust.

#3. Have conviction. Not everyone will believe in you or believe in what you are doing. It is your faith in looking for a greater good, a better society that will lead others to places they do not believe they could go to. At times you may feel alone, but the truth is you seldom are when you have and show your convictions. Stay true to them and others will follow.
Lastly, #4 -- have perseverance. I said this road for me started long ago, as your road will be long as well. It isn’t that you trip or fall down along the way. You will. It is that you stood back up, learned from the experience, and continued onward. That is what leaders do. The great gains you will achieve will take you getting up many times – just remember to learn from the experience each time.

Students, it has been an honor to be asked to join the Congresswoman today. It has also been an honor to speak to you. I believe you will do many great things. We live in a wonderful place with so much opportunity. Embrace it. Embrace it. Thank you.

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