

2023 Stephen Girard Award Recipient

Steven H. Biondolillo

“Channeling Stephen Girard”

Thank you for the generous introduction, Dave. And thank you for sharing my very favorite of Stephen Girard’s quotes, because it epitomizes, as well as any quote from any great American, a philosophy and guiding principle by which an individual can build a great life, and many individuals can build great communities and a great nation: “If I thought I was going to die tomorrow, I should nevertheless plant a tree today.”

Not plant a flag, not plant an ideology, and certainly not plant division, turmoil and hate. “Plant a tree,” Girard said, a tree, which is, perhaps, the greatest symbol of life itself, for its size, strength, endurance, life-giving capability, prolific replicability, and incredible versatility. This is what Stephen Girard intended to do... and did!... and aren’t we, sitting here in this magnificent Chapel, the living proof of Mr. Girard’s life-giving and life-supporting industriousness? Please join me in a round of applause for our founder, benefactor and father, Stephen Girard.

Twenty-five years ago, at the College’s Sesquicentennial celebration, I had the honor of addressing our community from this very platform. The title of my speech then was “The Genius of Stephen Girard,” in which I shared the following definition of genius: “Genius,” I said, is “aiming at a target that no one else can see... and hitting it,” after which I proceeded to innumerate and extol Girard’s unparalleled contributions to 19th century America in business, finance, public health, agriculture and philanthropy. As we all know, at the time of his death in 1831, Girard was the nation’s richest citizen, and his will—unprecedented in scope and detail—would establish him as the Father of American Philanthropy.

But, today, I’m not here to recount his achievements. Today, I’m here to do something different. I’m here to put on his mantle. For any graduate of this institution, to be recognized in the name of our Founder is excruciatingly humbling. How, exactly, could any of us—Girard’s mere mortal children—put on the mantle of one of the most industrious, brilliant, financially successful, courageous and generous humans who ever lived?

That said, before I share with you how I intend to channel M. Girard for the day, I'd like to call out and dismiss the "elephant in the living room." These are troubling days at our beloved school, my friends. In the past 12 years, we've had six presidents and interim presidents. One need not be knowledgeable, let alone sophisticated, about the ways of companies, bureaucracies, organizations or schools to know how telling and problematic that fact is. Done. Elephant dismissed.

For a mere moment, then, please allow me—allow us—to step into M. Girard's shoes. It's 1831, and he's looking out over the United States and calculating how his wealth—his fortune—might best accomplish two things: 1) protect and 2) promote this incredible fledgling nation which gave him the opportunity to live a life literally unprecedented in scope and achievement. Exactly what, he's thinking, will both protect these United States against its greatest threat and proactively promote its health and welfare?

All of us here, of course, know the answer. In creating Girard College for Orphans, M. Girard aimed to rescue and protect children from lives of poverty and other forms of dissolution, and provide them with the education, skills and other tools they would need to become productive citizens. M. Girard rightly deduced that the greatest threat to the new democracy was its disenfranchised, its marginalized children—its children permanently locked out of the nation's incredible opportunities and promises.

So, as I stand in M. Girard's shoes today, as I channel him, I'm not thinking about school administrators, faculty or staff. Like M. Girard in 1831, I'm only thinking about one thing: children and, specifically, the tens of thousands of children whose productive lives I intend to make possible.

Now, as someone who, since sitting in these pews, has traveled some distance and accomplished a couple things, I want to offer our current Juniors and Seniors some perspective and advice. I will make six points for them, then conclude with a word to and about my classmates, who are here today to celebrate the 50th anniversary of our high school graduation.

Juniors and Seniors...

Point 1. If you've developed nothing else practical at Girard, you've developed discipline. As you move forward in life, maintain your discipline and desire to get

things done. And remember, getting things done—achievement—is about service to others and being part of enterprises larger than oneself. Adding value to others is how one makes a living. With some luck, you'll add so much value to others, or value to so many others, that you will not only make a living, but you will also accrue some wealth. And wealth, as M. Girard's life instructs, is a wonderful enabler of personal, professional and philanthropic goals.

Point 2. Maintain your drive, your ambition, but remember from time to time that, achievement aside, you are enough.

Point 3. Be advised that life is a "contact sport"—not a superficial, social-media-centered sport, but a high-touch sport in which, without regard for yourself, you must show some love. Most people know when you selflessly care, and when you're in it only for advantage or payback. BTW: remembering that life is a "contact sport" is why not another Founder's Day should ever transpire without *every* member of the student body sitting in these pews, and connecting with their potentially helpful, older brothers and sisters.

Point 4. Do. Hard. Things. Accomplishing hard things increases your strength and resilience, produces the greatest difference for others, and engenders in you, your loved ones, and your communities the most pride and joy.

Point 5. Neither forget nor become embittered by the most important lesson you've already learned: specifically, that life, including the workforce, is neither always fair nor always a meritocracy. Perfectly level playing fields and incorruptible rules books don't exist. If that truth stymies you, invent your own work world, which is what I did. My team was the main catalyst in driving a sleepy fundraising technique—walkathons—from a \$20 million-per-year trickle with no Full Time Employees, into a \$2 billion-per-year mini-industry employing over 20,000, and generating untold numbers and kinds of resources for the nation's public health and other nonprofit organizations.

Point 6. If you're thinking you need to be a "strategic wonder" to blaze your own path, think again. A successful career is launched just as often by a humdrum opportunity as it is by brilliant strategy. My own career was launched one summer by a tiny grant to support litter control in a Boston neighborhood's parks. I converted the modest assignment into an award-winning national summer youth employment program initially engaging dozens, then hundreds and, over

time, thousands of at-risk youth in litter-control, anti-graffiti and other environmental improvement projects. The attention garnered by that program's success led Boston's longest-standing walkathon to enlist my assistance... and the rest is history.

Juniors and Seniors, as promised, six bits of advice that you can take to the bank.

And now I address my classmates:

It's hard to believe that 50 years have elapsed since we sat in these pews as students, but the unmistakable evidence of a half-century can be seen in our vanishing and white hair, expanded midsections, and slower gaits. It's also evident in the thousands of individuals we've collectively touched over five decades, many of whom we've entertained with tales of Girard. Goodness knows, if nothing else, growing up here made us world-class story tellers!

And while I always relate the expected Girard tidbits—things like, “Girard, where tetherball is a gladiator sport,” and “Girard, where ‘paddle’ never means ‘move your canoe along’”—I also relate some unexpected things:

I always share that no fewer than half my classmates, for all or a meaningful portion of their lives, have owned their own businesses. How improbable is that? What type of school produces that kind of record? It's not that Girard made us unemployable. What it made us is disciplined, industrious survivors—something you want at the helm of any company or enterprise. Also, because of the “level playing field” that Girard represents, the school bred in us an aptitude for fairness, which is another critical quality in business leadership.

One more particularly wonderful thing I share about my classmates is something I've learned over the years from their spouses. Specifically, the men of my class have been outstanding fathers. Truth is, I'd eat my hat if this observation wasn't true about the majority of Girardians—capable and loving parents forged by an upbringing among hundreds of peers.

Yet, for the very last thing I want to share not *about* my classmates, but *with* them, I'll need them all to stand up.

Many years ago I wrote a one-line poem that provides, perhaps, the truest measure of any Girardian's life, especially Girardians who, like us, are 50 years

and untold miles down the road. The name of the poem is called “The Distance.” Here it is: “When taking measure of the man, mark both where he’s landed, and where he began!”

By this measure, most Girardians, and especially the gentlemen standing before you, have seen more and experienced more of this life, overcome more challenges, and travelled a further distance than the average bear.

We are not the crew born on first or second base. We’re not even the crew born in the on-deck circle or dugout. We’re not even born on the same side of the street as the stadium. To reach second or third base in life, we’ve had to dodge traffic crossing the street, weave our way through the parking lot, bust into the stadium, navigate the corridors, break into the locker room, and shoulder our way into the dugout... all in order to get into the on-deck circle and up to bat... and all the while avoiding the temptation of comparing ourselves to our peers born in the on-deck circle, or on first or second base.

“When taking measure of the man, mark both where he’s landed, and where he began!”

By that yardstick, men, I offer you hearty congratulations on arriving at this day! And because today I’m channeling Stephen Girard, let me share with you what he wants to say. He wants to say to you a handful of words that parents everywhere shower on their children... words that M. Girard realizes are rarely showered upon children who grow up in institutions. What M. Girard wants to say to you is this, brothers, and I quote: “It is impossible to overstate how incredibly proud I am of each and every one of you.”

Hail Girard!

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