

## **Pulitzer Prize-Winning Poet Stephen Dunn Speaks at Stockton Commencement**

Students from 5 of the College's Schools Graduate in Morning of May 11

***For Immediate Release; with grad list attached and photos,  
captions on [flickr](#)***

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**Galloway Township, NJ** - Stephen Dunn, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in poetry and a Stockton Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Creative Writing, told graduates at today's morning commencement: "What's next for you should involve taking a chance on your ability to navigate the crooked road."

"I was the first in my family to go to college and had I not gotten a basketball scholarship, that might not have happened," Dunn said. "I was one of those serious-minded students - you might recognize the type - who didn't know how to be a good student."

He said he first experienced "talk that was highly observant and nuanced," from Coach Van Breda Kolff at Hofstra, where he was an undergrad. This "practical intelligence" about basketball led him eventually to "bring Van Breda Kolff's careful discrimination to my history and English classes, not to mention to my life itself."

Dunn addressed graduates of the Schools of Arts and Humanities, Business, Education, General Studies and Health Sciences at the first of two commencement ceremonies being held on Sunday, May 11 in the Sports Center of The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey's main Galloway campus. (Click for the full text of Dunn's [speech](#).)

Over 1,300 Stockton graduates received degrees in three commencement ceremonies here, including a master's and doctoral graduation on May 8.

Dunn told several stories to explain why he became a poet, the first, his "inability to speak in public, and so writing became a way of finding out and making sense of what I thought."

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He also said other plausible reasons were “that I was good at only two things: basketball and writing, and when my jumpshot started to fail, I was left with writing.”

“Another, the less serious one, is that I discovered my writing little love poems to girls to get them to like me occasionally worked - I learned that poetry could be efficacious,” Dunn said.

He went on to talk about the fact that many graduates “are in the limbo world of What Next? And having been in that world, and also having taught at Stockton for over 35 years, I have no doubt that most of you are prepared for What Next, which means you are ready for the inevitable crooked path that awaits you.”

Dunn told the graduates he was “more interested in your souls than in your successes in the big, demanding world of money and commerce, though the state of your souls may be very much related to such success. I’m not thinking about soul in a religious way, but, if you will allow the distinction, more so in a spiritual way.”

“The soul is character’s grid, its underpinning,” he continued. ... “To be a person of high character is no small thing, but what’s at stake in the Faustian bargain is our souls. There’s no doubt that during your lifetime you will be so tested. And speaking again for myself, one’s failures can be as instructive as one’s ability to hold the moral line.”

“My favorite writer/philosopher, Albert Camus, said, ‘I never said I was a good man. I only try to be one,’” Dunn noted.

He went on to tell the graduates that “technology has many benefits,” but that they should not “confuse texting, say, with intimacy, or a true connection.”

He said they may work for good employers who will value them for saying “what cannot be said, or what others are afraid to say,” or for bad employers, when doing that “might get you fired.”

“Today you begin your own legacy, which I trust will add to Stockton’s. Good luck to you all,” he concluded, citing a Japanese proverb:

“‘Fall down seven times, stand up eight.’”

Dr. Harvey Kesselman, provost and executive vice president of the college, gave opening remarks and called on all the mothers in the audience to stand and be recognized on Mother’s Day.

“Our students are promises we make to a future we will not see, and at this graduation, with these outstanding students, you can see that we are delivering on our promises,” said Dr. Kesselman.

He told the graduates, “It is still the case that more jobs are available for those holding a bachelor’s degree or higher than for any other degree. Indeed, New Jersey is ranked second in the nation for states creating jobs for college graduates.”

“What lies ahead of you is the delight of moving forward into a new life, but it also requires persistence, diligence, hard work, and getting along with others who may be different from you in a cosmopolitan world,” Dr. Kesselman said.

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“Our future depends upon building communities of respect and honor,” he continued. “Later in this ceremony, we will continue a tradition established by our students some years ago. We will join hands and sing our alma mater. This represents the Stockton spirit that was our founding principle. The joining of hands and raising them high is a symbol of our willingness to work with one another, to join together on important issues, and to resolve problems in a positive way regardless of our differences.”

“The Stockton spirit of education and values will carry you a long way,” said Dr. Kesselman. “When you leave this graduation today, do not forget the lessons learned at Stockton in building communities, in joining hands with others who may have different backgrounds and different views. You are our hope and our best future.”

The morning ceremony also featured a surprise for Lacey Reger, of Hammonton, NJ, whose brother flew 17 hours from Bahrain to surprise her. Zechariah Reger, a firefighter in the U.S. Coast Guard stationed in the Middle East, met his sister with roses as she came off the platform from receiving her Nursing diploma.

Zechariah last saw Lacey in October. When he found out she was graduating, he called Stockton College to arrange a surprise visit. “The baby is graduating,” he said proudly, and being overseas wasn’t going to stop him from being there. Zechariah is scheduled to return to Bahrain on Wednesday.

Zechariah’s mother, Jan, and father, Ross, also didn’t know he would be in attendance. He surprised them inside the Sports Center prior to the ceremony. Lacey has been working as a nurse’s aide and plans to continue working for AtlantiCare after graduation.

Valedictorian Rachael Wance, a Mercerville, NJ resident who received her degree in Speech Pathology and Audiology, told of climbing Mount Washington, the Northeast’s tallest mountain.

She said she did “training sessions” at Veterans Park on campus and “walked up and down small hills on smooth trails.” When she got to Mount Washington, “I panicked,” she said.

“Nonetheless, I took the first step up this mountain, then another, then another,” Wance continued. “Each step was a small success leading up to the grand success of being at the summit of Mount Washington. When we reached the top, I nearly cried. Partially because I was in pain, but mostly because it was an amazing personal accomplishment.”

“The first day at Stockton was like standing at the base of Mount Washington—we looked up to graduation, but we didn’t know the challenges we may face to get there,” Wance said. “As we started the climb, we made small but meaningful steps.”

“Each step we took should be treated as a success in itself as they are all an essential part of where we are today,” she said, adding that “just because we reached the top of Mount Stockton does not mean we should stop climbing other mountains in life.”

“Luckily, we have become well-trained, experienced mountain climbers as a result of climbing Mount Stockton,” Wance said. “We’ve learned how to be better academics, leaders, and believers. With this sturdy foundation, we will be much better able to climb whatever mountains we face in the future—no matter how rocky, steep, or impossible.”

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“Congratulations, Class of 2014. Now go climb some mountains!” Wance said.

The salutatorian was Morgan Sinclair of Chadds Ford, PA, a fellow Speech Pathology and Audiology major.

Dunn, who won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for “Different Hours,” was presented with a Doctor of Humane Letters by Dean Pappas, vice chairman of the Board of Trustees.

“Thank you, I always wanted one of these,” Dr. Dunn said.

Dr. Richard Berry, associate professor of Speech Pathology and Audiology, received the title of Professor Emeritus from Dr. Kesselman and Trustee Pappas.

Dr. Kesselman thanked the graduating class for its gift, a Stockton tradition.

“This year, the senior class has presented to us a large graphic of the Stockton ‘S’ logo for the coffee lounge in the Campus Center,” he said. “The faculty and staff of the college thank the graduating class for their generosity.”

Students Breanna Prettus and Joseph Sramaty sang the alma mater, “Our Stockton,” with lyrics by today’s speaker, Stephen Dunn. The music was composed by Ellen Grolman, a cellist, educator and music reviewer. The vocal group, Highest Praise, led the singing of the National Anthem earlier in the ceremony.

President Herman Saatkamp was not in attendance because of a family emergency, Dr. Kesselman explained at the beginning of the program.

Anthony Cicatiello, co-founder and CEO, CN Communications and president of the Research and Development Council of New Jersey, was to speak at the 2:30 p.m. graduation today for the Schools of Natural Sciences and Mathematics and Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Lori S. Herndon, president and chief executive officer of the AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center, and executive vice president of AtlantiCare, gave the keynote address at the Doctoral and Master’s Degree Commencement on May 8.

About 125 students received master’s and doctoral degrees in the third commencement held for Stockton’s growing graduate programs. The college now has 14 graduate degree programs, serving over 800 students.

“There will be thousands of moments when you will get to decide if optimism or pessimism will rule. Always choose optimism,” Herndon said. “I am convinced that having a positive outlook sets apart the leaders of all of our professions.”

Stockton Trustee Stanley Ellis presented the Distinguished Service Award to Herndon, who is a 1992 Nursing graduate of Stockton and a member of Stockton College Foundation Board.

Herndon, a resident of Brigantine, was cited for her “extraordinary dedication to civic and community engagement, and for her instrumental roles on numerous community and professional boards and associations, as well as her other significant contributions to the College, Community, and State of New Jersey.”

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