

Jackson Academy  
Distinguished Alumnus of the Year  
April, 2024

Class of 2024, I enjoyed hearing about all of your combined accomplishments at tonight's awards banquet. Congratulations! I am John Scarbrough from the Class of 1992. I earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Mississippi State University in 1996 followed by a Master of Occupational Therapy degree in 1998. I married my JA high school sweetheart, Jeanne Moak, in 1997 as a 24-year-old. I worked at the University of MS Medical Center as an Occupational Therapist in acute care, pediatrics and a hand therapy clinic. Along the way I got interested in management so I decided to get my MBA from Millsaps at the Else School of Management.

We started having kids and raising our boys in the early 2000's. In 2003 I decided to change career paths and began working at my wife's family's car dealership, Paul Moak Automotive. I have worked at Paul Moak since working in every capacity up to my present role as the Dealer Principal/Owner/Operator. I have a son, John Moak, who is a Junior at Samford University and Jacob who is soon to be a Senior at JA.

I tell you all of that not to bore you, but to give you a glimpse of the unfathomable number of decisions that goes into just one life. All of us know that we are the sum total of our decisions. I will read this, I won't read that. I will think this, I won't think that. I will watch this, I won't watch that. I will go there, I won't go there. I am going to follow God or I'm going to be god myself. The decisions we make are who we are. It's who we've become.

The next number of years you will have an incredible opportunity to make decisions. The key difference for you being today they come at you so fast. They seem to be there; right in front of you before you know it. And you have to be ready to act and be firm in your thinking more so than ever today. You just cannot risk being indecisive.

The fact is there are lots of people who are split up in this world. They struggle in their decision making which makes them feel weak or under pressure. The power comes when you are confident in your decision making before you ever come to the fork in the road. As you all have quite a few forks in the road ahead, here are 9 decisions that if gotten right, I believe will make all the difference in your life.

First, decide to be decisive. Our world is full of people who are thinking and researching and considering and googling and trying not to make a mistake. Just make a decision already. You see the point of researching something is to come to a conclusion. Successful people make their decisions quickly and change their mind slowly. Unsuccessful people make their decisions slowly and they change their mind quickly. Plant your flag in the ground and be confident with the path you have chosen. Remember, being decisive is not always about being right; it is about making a decision and then going about making it right. Decide to be decisive.

Second, decide to value education. Giving this advice on Senior Awards night where so many of you have done so many great things with your education sounds funny. But it's worth noting at least a billion people on earth at this moment would consider their prayers answered if they could trade places with you. The Jackson Academy culture, faculty, facilities are beyond comparison. I'm sure your next phase of education is going to be incredible as well. Think of your upcoming educational aspirations as a ladder. Ladders can take you to great heights. But no matter the height you attain, know that the feet of your ladder were planted here at JA. Just look at me. Here I stand all these years later, on this night, receiving this award, looking down from my own ladder thankful its feet were firmly planted at JA so many years ago. One more thing, the experiences/equipment/facility/staff you had at JA didn't just happen, they were built and developed over a long period of time on the shoulders of people like Jeanne and I and many others who decided to support the school financially outside our tuition dollars through the JA Annual Fund and other means. Start the habit early of donating dollars back to JA as a demonstration you value your education.

Third, decide to seek wisdom. A wonderful decision. This is not about education or the schools you attend. It's about the people with who we surround ourselves. One sure way I have learned to make better decisions is to not make them myself. I have a Board of Directors and they make them for me. Think about this, if you are in a bad place right now you got there by using your best thinking. Nobody wakes up saying I'm going to make bad decisions today. But we make them anyway and it was our best thinking that got us there. If our best thinking got us into a place we don't like, then that level of thinking is not likely to get us out. The shortest route to get to better thinking is to seek wisdom from other people. I call it having a board of directors. Now these people don't know they are on my board. But they are. They are smarter than me, more successful than me, been married longer than Jeanne and I. Having wise people in my life giving me advice has led me to better decision making, every time. Much of this speech comes from people who are or have been on my personal board of directors like Dr. Frank Pollard, Dr. Chip Stevens, Andy Andrews, Elbert Hubbard, my parents and in-laws. Decide to seek wisdom.

Fourth, decide to attend church. It is a decision you will make, or not make, every week for the rest of your lives. When I went to MSU, I told myself I was going to find a church and go to it as many Sundays as possible. I told myself, if I were at home I would be going so why shouldn't I go while in college? So that's what I did. Often times I was the only person walking out of the dorm/fraternity house on Sunday morning. That was ok by me. You see I have a decided heart. Once I commit to something that's what I am going to do. God's intention for your life was for there never be to be a four-year window where there was a parenthesis. A time out from Him, from His scripture, from His work in your life. So many decisions while in college are better made when taken from a Biblical worldview. It is said a tree falls the way it leans. Be careful which way you lean on this decision. Habits are formed in college that become part of who you are as an adult. Lean in to the habit of attending church.

Fifth, decide to show Initiative. The world bestows its big prizes, both in money and honors, for one thing, and that is initiative. What is initiative? It is doing the right thing without being told.

Close to that is doing the right thing after only being told once. The problem is most of the folks out there need to be told what to do two or three times and then they often do it wrong. Civilization is one long anxious search for employees who work when the boss is away, without asking lots of questions, becoming expert in their role and doing it at their best every day without being asked. You will be wanted in every city, every town; and every office, hospital or business. Before anything else on your resume, be able to show that you have great initiative.

Sixth, decide to be happy. Today, I will choose to be happy. You know anyone who is just always down? Always moping around? Do you have friends who you do not dare ask how they are doing? They are always saying how their lives are getting worse and worse. You know what? They are! Their lives, in measurable ways are getting worse. Here's why - our opportunities and our knowledge and information come from people that are placed in our lives. Happy people want to be around other happy people. Winey people get a lot less opportunities and knowledge because they have fewer and fewer people around them. Why? Because they are a drag. Make the decision to be happy. To live each day to the full. To limit the negative pressure and influence you feel online. Your attitude is a choice. It is a decision and it will expand your circle of people investing in your life. Decide to be happy.

Seventh, decide on your mission. What will be your mission? What will be your work? What income will you earn? What will fill your time? How will you give back? All of these are part of one's mission. Today I can tell you about mine because I am 50 and I have lived through them. But you are just on the brink of starting to figure yours out. Life is lived forward but understood backwards.

Know this, no matter your chosen mission your single most important skill will be your ability to deal with people. There is no role that precludes you from having to deal with, put up with, figure out or adapt to people. The top 3 skills post-college now are problem solving, teamwork and interpersonal skills. The sooner you master the skill of people, the smoother your life decisions will be.

As you seek out your life's mission, you will undoubtedly consider potential income earnings. Over the years I have learned that money and power reveal. They often unmask a person. Sometimes you like what is revealed; many times, you do not. In fact, thirty years on, I have spent some time around quite a few very wealthy people. I haven't observed any extra dose of happiness in them. Money solves money problems. It doesn't make people happy. It doesn't make people like you. So make money, but don't make it your life mission.

I could talk all night long about my chosen careers in the workforce; i.e. my paid jobs. But I imagine one of the main reasons I am standing here tonight is because of my time with Friends of Children's Hospital, i.e. my non-paid job. Friends has been part of my mission for the last 14 years. It turns out nothing motivates me quite like helping a sick kid. I have served as a Board Member, Treasurer, Chair Elect, Chairman of the Board and even was the interim Executive Director twice. During this time, we:

- a. Formed the Kites and Rainbow Committee that brought joy and smiles to the patients using music, lights, gifts and happiness.
- b. Worked closely with Century Club Charities to great benefit through the Sanderson Farms PGA Championship.
- c. Gained approval for a \$350k donation to the Children's Cancer Clinic
- d. Generated donations topping \$70k for lobby Christmas decorations
- e. Worked to secure giving to the Sidney and Friends Child Life Fund with a check for \$390k
- f. Oversaw growth of the car tag initiative, which generated revenue of over \$5.2 million and sold more than 136,000 tags over the past 14 years.
- g. Chaired the Clays for Kids clay shooting tournament at Providence Hill Farms which has generated over \$140,000 in its first two years.
- h. Gained Board approval for funding a \$1M Chair of Pediatric Neurology Endowment in honor of Dr. Owen B and Lynn M Evans

So why did I do all of that? What drove me? Well it was not about the titles or the recognition or the awards. I did it for Hudson. I became a parent on March 2, 2002. Hudson Scarbrough came into our lives and I knew at that moment that I was meant to be a dad. I could not wait to raise this boy. To watch him grow and flourish. Everything he did brought me joy. Then just months later Hudson got sick. The doctors used medical words to describe my son that a dad never wants associated with his child. The years I thought I had with him turned into weeks. On April 15, 2003 Hudson gently passed away in my arms.

What a gift his brief life was to me. He taught me that children are our most important guests, who enter into our home, ask for attention and instruction, stay for a while, and then leave to follow their own way hopefully better from the time spent with us. The hardest part of this truth with Hudson was the brevity of his life. I had so much love I wanted to give him but I ran out of time. I had a choice to make. I could choose to be negative, to engage in self-destructive habits and pity. Or I could give back to the very hospital where my son's life was stilled by cancer. And that's what I've done these last 14 years; the kids in that hospital became my central mission. It is interesting to note that my mission of Children's Hospital came about from the single hardest moment of my life. But I think that is how missions work. You will find yours one day. It does not have to be as dramatic as mine, but you will find it.

Eighth, decide on your mate. Who will be the love of my life - my husband, my wife? It is a crucial decision. Choose a mate who speaks wisdom into your life. Choose a mate better than yourself. You'll interact with him/her more often than any other person on the planet. You will get feedback from him/her on most every decision you'll ever make. Make sure you marry someone who is wise enough to give you good counsel. You and your spouse owe a debt to your family, your community, your country to leave sons and daughters who will lead, inspire and create. Choose your spouse wisely.

God gave me a beautiful wife, my best friend, and she gave me three incredible boys. She gave me a family which changed my life. There is a saying, "having a child is like having your heart

walking around outside of your body” which is so apt for our story. I’ve done nothing greater, nothing more rewarding, nothing more worthwhile, nothing has brought me more peace, more joy, more happiness, more contentment in my life, than simply being a good husband and a good father.

For those guys in the room, let me tell you what it means to be a man. It has nothing to do with money, achievements, skills, accomplishments, degrees, professions, positions. A real man loves his wife. A real man is faithful to his wife. A real man puts his wife and children as the most important thing in his life. See to this decision in your own life.

Ninth, decide on your Master. This one preempts all the other decisions. It is the most important one you will make, or not make, your entire life. Deciding who your Master is going to be. Every one of us are going to be mastered. Everyone is going to serve something. The greed of this world can master you. The desire for fame can master you. The god of busyness can master you. The desire to get for yourself can become your master. Or Jesus Christ can be your master. If you make Jesus your foundation, you have made the wisest decision this 50-year-old Distinguished Alumnus of the Year can recommend. Am I going to follow God or am I going to be god myself? God has a plan for each one of you. Use these nine decisions as you strain toward what is ahead toward the goal He has set for you. Thank you for your attention tonight and congratulations Jackson Academy Class of 2024.