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## School motivation : Overcome adversities to reach our goals

We are going to talk about the power that each of you has to commit to your education. We are going to talk about the power that you have to fulfill your potential and unlock opportunities that you can't even begin to imagine for yourselves right now.

And when I talk about students needing to take responsibility for their education, I want you all to know that I'm speaking from my own personal life experience. Like Menbere, growing up, I considered myself pretty lucky. Even my parents didn't have a lot of money, they never went to college themselves, they had an unwavering belief in the power of education.

So they always pushed me and my brother to do whatever it took to succeed in school. So when it came time for me to go high school, they encouraged me to enroll in one of the best schools in Chicago. It was a school a lot like this one. And listening to Menbere's story, it was so similar, because my school was way across the other side of the city from where I lived.

So at 6:00 a.m every morning, I had to get on a city bus and ride for an hour, sometimes more, just to get to school. And I was willing to do that because I was willing to do whatever it took for me to go to college. I set my sights high. I decided I was going to Princeton. But I quickly realized that for me, a kid like me, getting into Princeton wasn't just going to happen on its own.

See I went to a great school, but at my school we had so many kids, so few guidance counselors, they were dealing with hundreds of students, so they didn't always have much

time to help me personally get my applications together. Plus, I knew I couldn't afford to go on a bunch of college visits. I couldn't enroll in SAT prep classes. We didn't have money. And then – get this – some of my teachers straight up told me that I was setting my sights too high. They told me I was never going to get into a school like Princeton. I still hear that doubt ringing in my head. So it was clear to me that nobody was going to take my hand and lead me to where I needed to go. Instead, it was going to be up to me to reach my goal. I would have to chart my own course. And I knew that the first thing I needed to do was have the strongest academic record possible.

So I worked hard to get the best grades I could in all of my classes. I got involved in leadership opportunities in school where I developed close relationships with some of my teachers and administrators. I knew I needed to present very solid and thoughtful college applications, so I stayed up late, got up early in the morning to work on my essays and personal statements.

I knew my parents would not be able to pay for all of my tuition, so I made sure that I applied for financial aid. That FAFSA form was my best friend. I knew the deadlines, everything. Most importantly, when I encountered doubters, when people told me that I wasn't going to cut it, I didn't let that stop me. In fact, I did the opposite. I used that negativity to fuel me, to keep me going. And at the end, I got into Princeton, and that was one of the proudest days of my life. But getting into Princeton was only the beginning. Graduation from Princeton was my ultimate goal.

So I had to start all over again, developing and executing a plan that would lead me to my goal. And of course, I struggled a little bit. I had to work hard, again, to find a base of friends and build a community of support for myself in this Ivy League University. I remember as a freshman I mistakenly rolled into a class that was meant for juniors and seniors. And there were times when I felt like I could barely keep my head above water.

But through it all, I kept that college diploma as my North Star. And four years later, I reached that goal. And then I went on to build a life I never could have imagined for myself. I went to law school, became a lawyer. I've been a vice president for a hospital. I've been the head of a nonprofit organization. And I am here today because I want to know that my story can be your story. The details might be a little different, but let me tell you, so many of the challenges and the triumphs will be just the same.

You might be dreaming of becoming a doctor or teacher, maybe a mechanic or a software designer. Or you might not know what you want to do right now – and that's fine. But no matter what path you choose, no matter what dreams you have, you have got to do whatever it takes to continue your education after school. – Again, whether that's going to community college, getting a technical certificate, or completing a training opportunity, or

going off to a four-year college. And once you've completed your education, you will have the foundation you need to build a successful life. That's how me , that's how Menbere, that's how so many other students have overcome adversities to reach our goals.